Nogizaka Haruka no Himitsu Volume1

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These are the novel illustrations that were included in volume 1

乃木坂春香の秘密

俺のクラスメイトの乃木坂春香は、容姿端麗で才色兼備で、『白城の星屑（ニュイ・エトワーレ）』の二つ名を持ち、ファンクラブの会員数も三桁を超す、まさに深窓のお嬢様という言葉がぴったりの学園のアイドルだ。そんな彼女の秘密を知ってしまったあの日以来、俺の平凡な学園生活は終わりを告げ、ある意味奇妙な彼女との関係が始まった。そして、春香が周囲にひた隠しにしている秘密とは――。

第4回電撃hp短編小説賞の最優秀賞受賞者、電撃文庫でついにデビュー！

い-8-1
乃木坂春香の秘密
五十嵐雄策
電撃文庫
590

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五十嵐雄策（いがらしゆうさく）

五十嵐雄策の秘密。第4回電撃hp短編小説賞の最優秀賞受賞者。趣味はピアノ・料理・ハーブティーと、どこぞのお嬢様のような設定。シカゴに住んでいた過去を持つ帰国子女で、弁護士を目指すかたわらで執筆活動をスタート。弁護士作家の誕生が待ち遠しい？

【電撃文庫作品】

乃木坂春香の秘密

イラスト：しゃあ

しゃあの秘密。盆と年末は有明で戦うタイプのナイスガイ。「電撃帝王」でもまったりと活躍中。座右の銘は“チャンスの女神にバックドロップ”。赤いヒトではないらしい。

カバー／加藤製版印刷

乃木坂春香の秘密
五十嵐雄策
イラスト◎しゃあ

クラスメイトの乃木坂春香は完全無欠である。

容姿端麗なお嬢様で、性格もいい。

誰にでもにこやかで、まさに白百合が咲くような雰囲気だ。

さらには、頭も良く教養もある。

日舞に生け花、茶道に書道。

彼女が幼い頃から習っている稽古事の数は優に十を超える。

しかも、その全てにおいて類稀（たぐいまれ）な

才能を発揮しているから驚きである。

しかし。

そんなほとんど完璧超人みたいな

乃木坂春香にも

たった一つだけ弱点、

というか秘密があった。

その

乃木坂春香の秘密とは――。

綾瀬裕人（あやせゆうと）

「意外な一面があるって分かって、少し身近に感じた気がして嬉しかった」

乃木坂春香（のぎざかはるか）

「そんなこと言ってくれた人は……初めてです」

綾瀬ルコ（あやせ）

一流企業の社長秘書をやっている裕人の姉。家では大雑把で適当な性格な上に大酒飲み、おまけに空手二段でムダに強い!

上代由加里（かみしろゆかり）

綾瀬裕人のクラスの副担任であり、女子大を卒業したばかりの新米音楽教師。実はルコの友人にして、裕人とも顔馴染み!

乃木坂美夏（のぎざかみか）
春香とは正反対な性格の中学二年生の妹。趣味はヴァイオリンとスカッシュとイノシシの餌付け。
桜坂葉月（さくらざかはづき）
春香の自宅で多数のメイドを束ねるメイド長。春香や美夏の世話を一身に引き受けている。
「お姉ちゃんをよろしくね、おに～さん♪」
「……」

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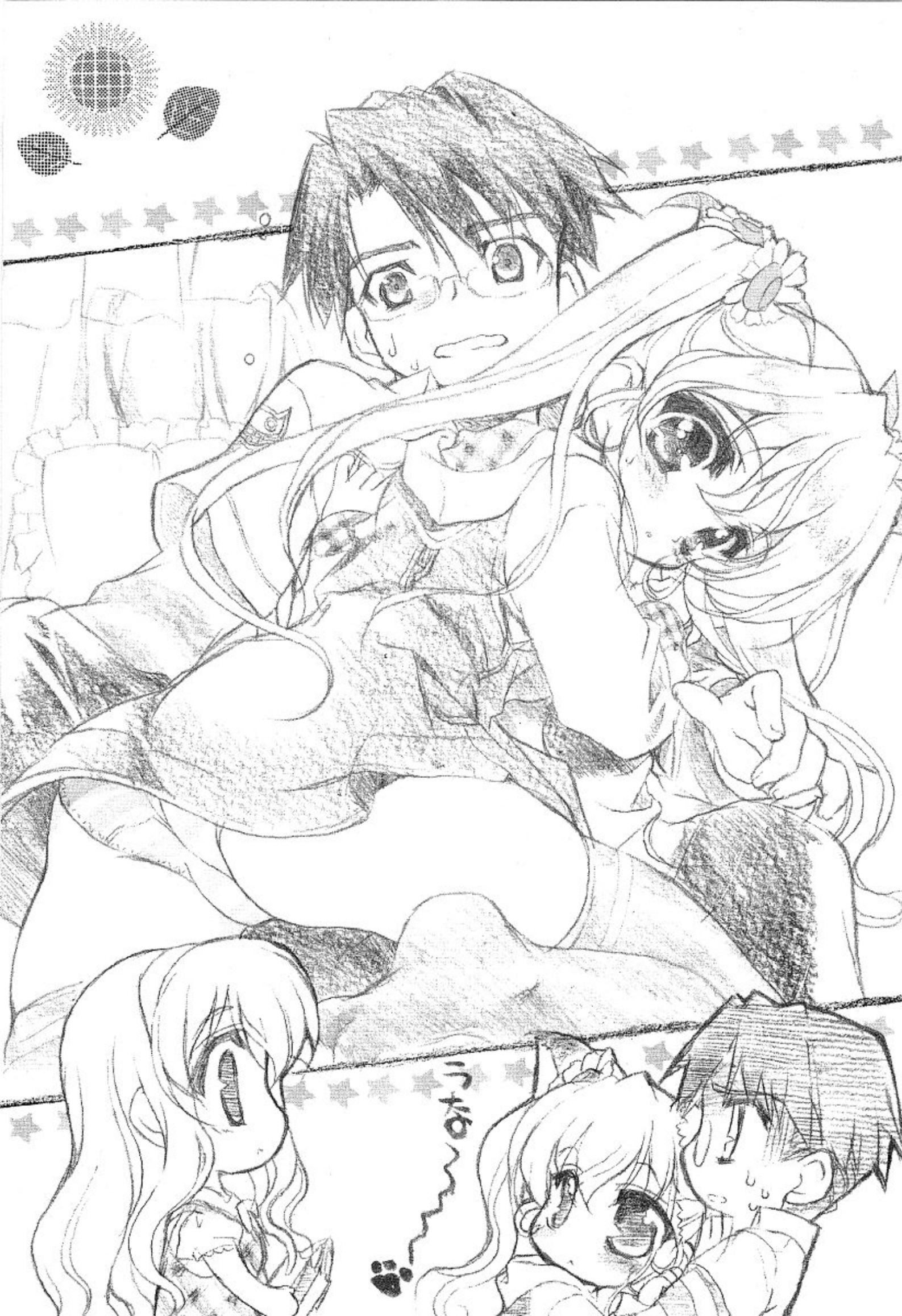
Designed by Toru Suzuki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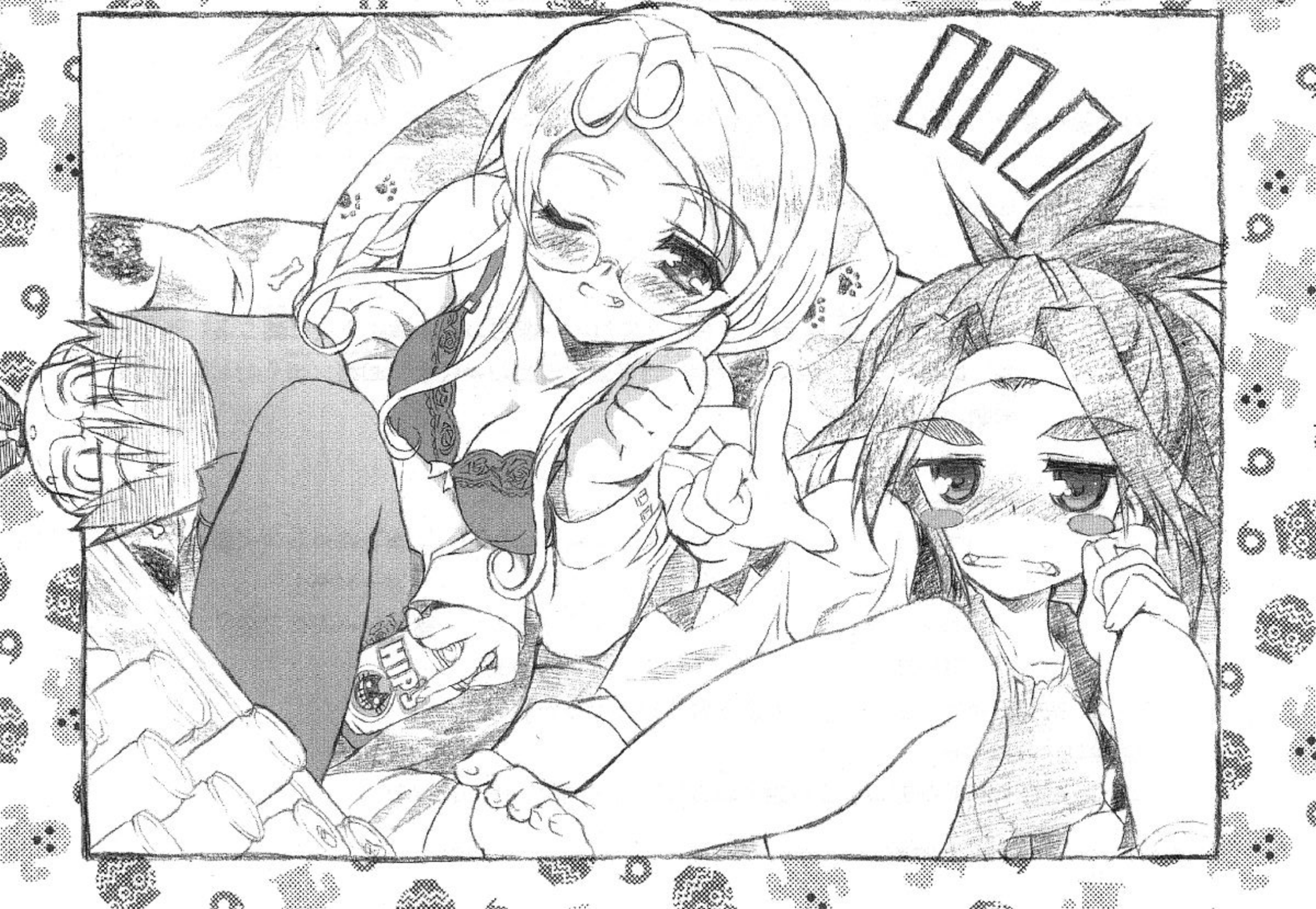

Prologue

My classmate Nogizaka Haruka is completely flawless.

It may seem a little, you know… to hear this stupid-sounding sentence as an opening, but this is indeed a fact. An undeniable fact.

Nogizaka Haruka has beautiful soft hair that stretches down to her back, obvious double eyelid and clear eyes that are slightly hanging down at the sides. Adding on to that, she emits an astonishing aura, I believe any man that walks past her on the streets, a hundred out of a hundred of them would be charmed into turning back to look at her once more. Speaking of which, I am one of them. After all, she was crowned Miss Hakujō Academy when she was just a mere first-year student last year with an amazingly high number of votes, and ever since that beauty contest, everyone calls her "Nuit Étoile" (The Silver Star of the Night). The number of guys that confessed to her in that year, reached a three digit figure, a secret fan club was established specially for her, and there were sayings that even the principal is a member of that fan club, and it was likely that was more than just a rumor.

Even with that, it is still not that special yet, because there is always someone that is like a school idol in any school. Taking a stroll across the entire country, you will be sure to find tens, hundreds of people like this.

However, Nogizaka Haruka's outstanding quality lies in that: her good qualities that deserve special mention, goes beyond her appearance that was mentioned above.

Firstly, she has a very good character.

Her personality is prudent and mature; she shows a smile to whomever she meets and treats others gently, giving off an atmosphere like lillies blossoming. Let's not talk about others first, she is a precious example to defy the logic that all beauties have an ugly personality.

Besides that, she is very smart.

One year ago, during the ability test that was conducted at the start of school, all her subjects were above ninety marks, taking first place for the entire grade and leaving a big gap between her and the second placing. Ever since her astonishing feat, she has maintained the first place up till now. Maybe it could be

said that her brain structure is entirely different from normal people…… Compared to her, all our brain juices must be stuff that is like dried up dregs of beans.

Furthermore, she is cultured.

Japanese folk dance with flower arrangement, the art of tea with calligraphy. The skills that she has learnt since young must add up to at least ten and in each of the areas for these skills she is able to show an unparalleled talent, making it all the more shocking. Among which, her best would be piano, her piano skills have been commented to be of professional standard, receiving a single-sided praise in the music realm. Now she is performing before the eyes of the entire class, just watching her fingers dance elegantly on the piano keys would make one agree to those comments.

Even more so, she is clever and deft, possessing a first-rate qualification for English, a qualification for a certain ancient martial art style that allows her to take lessons in place of the master, the title of being a daughter of a renown business family…… etc. All in all, she is someone that takes on the phrase “Heaven does not bestow more than a single gift” (A phrase that is to say one person possesses no more than a single gift or

talent [translation may not be too accurate to get the direct phrasing]) head-on and obtain a total victory over it.

However……

Even Nogizaka Haruka, that is so close to perfection, has one single weakness or that is to say, a secret.

But right now, the only person that knows this secret is me; and because of this, I have a closer relationship with her. In the end, I was half forced into stepping into a world I have never touched on before. Just that……

Then, her performance ended while I was thinking.

"What you've just heard was the third movement of Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 23 in F minor, Appassionata, performed by Nogizaka Haruka. Thank you, Haruka."

Under the music teacher's, Yukari (twenty-three years old, currently looking for a boyfriend), direction, every one of us started to clap warmly, while Nogizaka Haruka gave a shy smile that could melt the audience.

I felt bliss just by looking at her. She's just too cute to be true. It wasn't just the normal guys, even the class president, Morita, the one who kept a serious, no-nonsense face even when listening to jokes, was squinting with a slight sinful look in his eyes. As for the girls, they all gave her looks of respect and admiration that were devoid of any traces of jealousy. I guess the smile of an angel would be what Haruka has on her face right now.

Suddenly, her eyes, with pupils as clear as the water from the Alps, locked onto mine. When she caught me looking, she smiled and waved at me discreetly. I could feel that at this moment her smile was more affectionate than usual, different from the smile that she gave to her other classmates.

Mm, she's indeed a cute girl.

I couldn't help but show a smile.

Not too long ago, this kind of situation would have been like a red pig flying on a plane, something that would never have happened to us. The "not too long ago" in question, was the time before I knew of Nogizaka Haruka's secret, because before I found out about her

secret, Nogizaka Haruka and I were just normal classmates--- And she was the school idol, while I was just an average student--- that never even had a single real conversation before.

I thought about how we began.

It was only three months ago, but looking back now, it feels as though it happened a very long time ago. Maybe it's because we've spent so much time together in the three months that we've known each other.

That's right.

Our relationship started from that incident in the school library during after school hours.

That is, the incident that happened was the day I found out about Nogizaka Haruka's secret.

From that day onwards, I waved goodbye to my plain school life to begin the subtle and exquisite relationship between Haruka and I.

That is, Nogizaka Haruka's Secret!!

Chapter 1

1

The lunch break on that day wasn't any different from the usual lunch break.

I was eating lunch and chatting with a few classmates whom I am close to (Nagai, Takenami, and Ogawa, more commonly known as the three idiots) in the 2-1 classroom of the private high school Hakujo Academy. The topic of conversation would probably induce suicidal thoughts in other people.

"That's why I think that the female sports uniform should have bloomers, anyone who wears Bermuda shorts that reach down to the knees isn't human. Anyone who's opposed to this motion isn't a citizen of Japan."

"That's right, I think so too."

"You're absolutely right."

Ogawa and Takenami nodded their heads vigorously in agreement with Nagai's opinion.

"Yuuto, what do you think?"

"Hmm? Well, I'm alright with anything I guess."

I was really alright with anything that the girls wore, which was why I answered the way I did.

"Alright with anything? It's because of your sitting-on-the-fence attitude that Japan has been brought to its current state of affairs. You're always like this, not taking sides on anything."

"Ayase, that's what you are. You don't have your own opinion on anything, you always cross the bridge only when you bump into it. You'll be sorry one day if you continue like this."

"That's right, you can't carry on like this!"

The three of them took turns taking shots at me, but they were merely meddling in other people's affairs. I don't deny that I'm an irresponsible and insensitive guy (though it's rather embarrassing that I say that about myself), but even I don't want to hear such criticism from three guys who discuss bloomers with perfectly straight faces.

"Alright, let's do this! You can listen to our respective arguments before deciding which side you're on. We'll start with the visual impact of bloomers."

Gosh, they really are the 'three idiots'.

I sighed soundlessly while casually looking around the classroom. Everything was normal, students were eating their lunch while chatting with their friends, making up the familiar lunchtime scenery.

The spot in the classroom that attracted me the most was that seat next to the corridor. Because in the classroom that is so messy that it would make even the monkey enclosure look tidy, only that particular spot had a soothing and comforting aura around it.

Seated in that place, was a beautiful girl endowed with the nickname "Nuit Étoile".

She's my classmate, Nogizaka Haruka.

She had probably finished lunch already, as she leaned slightly backward and was concentrating on the book that she held in her left hand. The way she flipped the pages of her book with her fingers looked like a scene straight out of a painting. Colloquially, it means that she's too cute to be described. Or perhaps I should say

that she's the very embodiment of a perfect and beautiful lady. Anyway, it seems as though all traces of corruption could be washed away just by looking at her.

I stared, mesmerized, at Nogizaka Haruka with my mouth stuffed with bread (while completely ignoring the discussion between Nagai and the others). Yes, the psychological wound received a few moments ago had already been healed. The feeling of pure bliss would probably be something like this, right?

I immersed myself in the joy of watching her while fantasizing.

But after a few short minutes, this feeling of bliss was abruptly ended.

I heard a familiar voice coming from the other side of the corridor. It wasn't a very loud voice, but it would probably take up a lot of my time, since it's probably Nobunaga. I sighed soundlessly again; here comes another idiot.

"Is Yuuto here?"

Just as I expected, a familiar face appeared at the entrance of the classroom. He's a petite pretty boy with light brown hair whom others would mistake as a girl from afar. This fellow started shouting the moment he saw me.

"Ah! There you are! Yuuto, did you catch the anime that aired late last night? I recorded it as I watched because I feel that that's the best way to appreciate it."

The volume of his voice attracted some attention from the other students in class, but after everyone saw that it was from Nobunaga, they resumed whatever it was they were doing before immediately. I don't know how to put it, but anyway, my classmates have gotten used to his presence after he's been coming over to talk to me since the start of the school year.

"You didn't watch it? Yesterday's 「The Shy Triangle will air its last episode next week, and the climax of the entire series is when the good friend of the protagonist... Ah, the DVD seems to be going on sale soon, I'll definitely go and buy it, since it's going to be a limited edition and will come with a figurine of the protagonist ' Clumsy girl Aki-chan'..."

The guy who ran into my classroom and started talking about a topic that one would find it hard to associate with his appearance is Asakura Nobunaga. I've known him since kindergarten, which is why you could use the phrase 'hellish bonds of friendship' to describe our relationship, though he's still a good friend of mine,

since he doesn't get me into any trouble. Honestly speaking, he's still quite a cheerful and sociable person, which is why he can strike up a conversation with almost anyone. His academic results are extremely good, with Physics and Mathematics being his best subjects. From his earlier actions, you can tell that his hobby is a rather extreme one, a form of otaku-ism...which is what we all know as the 'Akihabara clan'. The man whose name is a combination of the names of two imperial generals has a weak looking exterior and a hobby which neither fit the names of a warring general nor his appearance. In conclusion, he's a guy with complicated characteristics and is hard to place into any category.

"Yuuto, you've really missed out by not watching. This anime series was adapted from a manga, but its something like a tale prior to the story, explaining why the protagonist and his best friend turned against each other....."

"Ah------ I got that already!"

I had to do something to shut him up or he'll eat up my entire lunch break. I took this course of action precisely based on past experiences.

"It's not nice of you to be such a wet blanket when I was just getting into my rhythm!"

"It's not nice of you to suddenly run into someone else's classroom to spam him with your personal hobby!"

"Is that so? But doesn't everyone like to talk about these kind of things?"

"Please do not think that everyone is like you!"

"Hmm, but, you like these kind of things, don't you?"

"Don't I always say that I don't have any special inclination?"

I don't like it, but I don't hate it either. I don't agree with it, but I don't disagree with it either. This is my stance regarding this fellow, and the rest of the Akihabara clan. No, to be more precise, it's more of 'I don't really understand them'. In short, I'm still quite mystified regarding the age-old question of 'why are people at this age still so interested in cartoons', and even more surprisingly, I'm actually good friends with someone like this.

"Hmm...But I've always thought that you have the right attributes."

What kind of attributes?

"That's the highest level of praise that I'll give to anyone, you know. Hmm...let's not talk about this anymore. Yuuto, I've got big news for you!"

"Big news?"

I felt that what this fellow was going to say probably won't be anything serious and wholesome, but...

"I've been looking for a certain magazine all this while, haven't I? Our school's library finally bought this old issue! Our library's the best, I can import in any rare book that I want by just filling in an application form. The school can afford to buy all these books because of the extremely generous donations that they have been receiving. Their funds seem limitless. Money really makes the world go round indeed, yah~"

Nobunaga grinned widely as he babbled on and on about this big news.

Magazine? I seem to remember him asking me to help look for a magazine with an extremely strange name a while back. Looks like the school had approved his application form.

".....Wait a minute, did you fake an application form?"

I looked at him suspiciously.

"That's rude, I would never do something like that."

Nobunaga shook his head as he gave a "you're totally wrong" expression, and then answered with a perfectly straight face, "I merely threatened them."

That's even worse.

But that fellow completely ignored my reaction.

"「INNOCENT SMILE is an extremely famous magazine! The original manga of the anime that aired yesterday night was serialized in this magazine. It wasn't too long ago, so you probably should have some memory of it. It caused quite a stir when its first edition came out."

Just as Nobunaga went into his extremely long-winded debate mode, there was a huge noise in the classroom.

Our position was in the middle of the classroom, while the sound came from the opposite direction. To be more precise, it came from the second-last seat from the corridor, which was the place that held my attention before Nobunaga came in. From a certain perspective, that was the one place in class that would never be associated with loud and jarring noises.

But right now, Nogizaka-san was standing there with her eyes trained on the two of us, with a chair lying face-down, the source of that loud noise, beside her feet.

The classroom suddenly became extremely quiet. Nogizaka-san, who always wore an expression of peaceful serenity, now had a disturbed expression on her face.

"No...Nogizaka-san, what happened?"

"I...I don't know, we didn't do anything weird did we?
"

"She seems to be looking at Ayase-kun..."

Murmurings were heard in the classroom.

Did we do something wrong?

Even though I felt that we hadn't done anything, the sharp gaze that Nogizaka-san threw at us was that of a policewoman who has just caught a molester in the act on a crowded train. Under a gaze of that nature, Nobunaga and I really looked like we had done something against the welfare of society, and the looks from the rest of the class seemed to ask the exact same question, 'What did the two of you do?'.

"Yuuto, what do we do? Everyone's looking at us."

"Ye.....Yeah....."

I thought that the most probable reason would be that Nobunaga's voice was way too loud, disturbing Nogizaka-san's reading. Even though I was already used to it, Nobunaga's voice would naturally become extremely loud when he talked about his hobby. It wouldn't come as much of a surprise if that had disturbed Nogizaka-san.

Which would mean that we had really done something wrong. So we should probably apologize.

Under the watchful eyes of the rest of the class, I walked towards Nogizaka-san's seat.

"Erm.....I'm sorry for disturbing you with our loud conversation."

I bowed deeply as an apology, Nogizaka-san then seemed to regain her usual expression.

"Ah, that's not it, you've misunderstood. I didn't mean to blame the two of you or anything, so you don't have to apologize to me."

"?"

But, weren't you glaring at the two of us just a few moments ago?

"It's nothing, so, it's nothing.....I'm sorry for troubling everyone."

After saying that, Nogizaka-san politely bowed to the rest of the class as she righted her chair and sat down as though nothing had happened.

However, this left us extremely confused.

"What just happened?"

"I don't know..... Wasn't it because of the noise you were making?"

"I'm not noisy!"

I ignored Nobunaga's contradictory loud shout to defend his stance that he's not loud, but instead I stared at Nogizaka-san like someone who had been played around with by a fox spirit. On the regal face of the "Nuit Étoile", a trace of uneasiness could still be seen... there has to be some reason for that.

Deviating from the topic at hand, from the time when Nobunaga rushed into the classroom to when Nogizaka stared at us, Nagai and the other two were still heatedly debating on the topic of bloomers. Was that due to concentration, or just plain stupidity?

I think the correct answer should be the latter.

Actually, I didn't really care if they're idiots or not.

The fifth and sixth periods ended without incident. After class had ended, I walked towards the library only because that Nobunaga told me.....

"Yuuto, I'm really sorry, but could you help me return this book to the library? Since you're free after school anyway, while I have to rush back to finish the map for WonFes--"

.....Geez! I don't know what Wan Wan Fes. (Could it be a festival for dogs? But I recall that guy having a cat instead...). If it's like this, then he should have just returned it yesterday! But thoughts are just thoughts, and I agreed to help him, as he had often helped me out before (like him lending me textbooks when I forgot mine: helping me to repair my computer when it broke down.....etc), oh well, I really had nothing to do after school anyway.

And this was why I came to the library, a place where I would normally almost never set foot in.

It was said that the rate of usage for our library was unbelievably low, because, the number of people,

including yours truly, who've actually used the library could be counted on one hand. To increase the rate of usage of the library, the school even set up an electronic lending system, renovated the library to be an extremely comfortable place for reading, and had bought books of all genres. But to the modern generation of children who're far disposed from printed products, all these measures were for naught, as nothing had changed. But I have not used the library for anything other than afternoon naps, so who am I to say anything.

Anyway, because of the pitiful number of users, I shouldn't need much time to return a book.

I walked towards the computer terminal and started to tap the keyboard. One has to use the computer to borrow or return books, which was rather tedious (Nobunaga said that once you get used to it, computers would definitely be faster than human processing). Oh well, if I felt that something as simple as this was tedious, then I probably won't be able to survive in modern society. The man who doesn't work does not get to eat. I entered the reference code of the book and my student identification number.....OK, that's it. I only have to return the book to its place on the shelf. (By the way, the title of the book is 「Pretty Girl Models Collection III --- The History of Ball

Joints. Our school really does buy everything). Mission accomplished, I can go home now.

Just as I was about to walk towards the exit.

"..."

I spotted a suspicious character.

How should I put this? Mm, it is an extremely suspicious character indeed.

Because this person is hiding her face with her schoolbag while attempting to move stealthily behind the bookshelves like a ninja or assassin, and its a female student to boot. Thus if this is not strange, then what is (sarcasm)... What is with that person? She seems to want to conceal her movements, but isn't this making it worse, and attracting more attention instead? Or, could it be that she actually wanted attention instead?

In any case, it would be better not to come into contact with someone like that. Troubles come about from the mouth, as long as you are not overly curious, even the cat could suffer an unexplained death. Just as I decided to pretend not to see anything and tried to get out of the library---

I saw the face of the suspicious character behind the bookshelf.

At that moment, I thought my eyes were playing tricks on me.

I thought I was hallucinating due to my brain's rejection reaction towards this library that I almost never step into.

"....."

Why would I think that way?

Because I was extremely familiar with that face.

"That's....."

Nogizaka-san?

As unbelievable as it sounds, that suspicious person really was Nogizaka Haruka. I would never mistake that beautiful face of hers even if I was a mile away. But why was she behaving so strangely?

I was bursting with questions, but Nogizaka-san didn't notice me as she ambled up to the computer terminal

beside me, with the air of a 15-year old girl who's preparing to steal a motorcycle in the middle of the night , and began to type. I saw a magazine beside her, so she was probably planning to borrow it.

Tap, tap, I heard the sound of fingers on the keyboard.

She had probably finished borrowing the book, as Nogizaka-san lifted her head from the terminal with the smile of a German expert. Just as she prepared to walk towards the exit.....

Our eyes met.

"..."

"..."

At that moment, time stopped.

"..."

"..."

"...Erm...What brings you here?"

That was what I wanted to ask her, but it wasn't surprising that Nogizaka-san would look at me as though she was looking at that legendary giant monster Uma, because the probability of meeting me in the library was lower than meeting a yeti.

"Since when have you been standing here?"

"For a while now."

"You...You saw it?"

"?"

Saw what?

"You...You saw the book that I borrowed..."

"No, I didn't see it..."

"Oh, is that so? Hoo!"

Nogizaka-san's expression was reminiscent of a middle-aged manager who just found out that he wasn't on the list of retrenched personnel. What's happening?

"?"

"Ah! It...It's nothing, Ayase-kun, please don't think about it, I'll be going now."

Nogizaka-san hurriedly nodded to me as she strode towards the exit. Maybe because she was disturbed by my presence, but she totally didn't notice that she was walking towards a reading table and chair set.

"Ah...Nogizaka-san, that's....."

"Hiiee!?"

And then!

Smash!

In the midst of the noise of falling furniture, Nogizaka-san, who'd tripped over a chair, fell onto her back. This was a breathtaking set of actions that one would be hard-pressed to produce.

"Ou...Ouch! Why would there be a chair here..."

Things were becoming stranger, those chairs have always been there, and the serenely-peaceful

Nogizaka-san would actually do something out of character. Just what was happening? Perhaps this was what "even the most complete strategy could fail" was referring to?

Whatever the case, I couldn't possibly just leave her there, so I helped Nogizaka-san up. From a certain perspective, Nogizaka-san probably brought it upon herself! But it would have been ungentlemanly of me not to help a girl who has just fallen down in front of you (especially if that girl is Nogizaka Haruka), and I have a National Gentlemanly Conduct Grade 2 certificate..... Even though I just made that up myself.

"Ah.....Thank you! I'm so sorry!"

After helping up the almond-eyed Nogizaka-san, I turned my eyes to her personal belongings that were scattered all over the place.

It was really a mess, but just as I was going to help her pick up her things...

"No...You can't!"

That scream was unbelievably loud, the kind that you hear when a bedroom scene suddenly shows on the T.V.

when you're eating with your family. I can't? What does she mean? Is she saying that I'm not allowed to touch her personal things with my dirty hands.....? No, I don't think Nogizaka-san would think that way.

"?"

Although I didn't know why Nogizaka-san wanted to stop me, I still reached out to help her pick up the magazine.

"No, don't do it!"

Nogizaka-san reached out towards the magazine at my feet like a depraved bandit.

But...

"Ah?"

On the path of her trajectory, there was a mathematics notebook!

"Ah? This...!?"

She stepped onto that notebook with one hundred percent accuracy!!

"Ehhhhhhh!?"

The foot that had all the force of her body weight behind it, was set free from its contact with the ground by virtue of the friction (or lack thereof) between the notebook and the floor of the library!

"Kyaaaaaa!"

And then, her body flew into the air, while directly in front of her.....was a bookshelf.

Smash! Boom!

In the midst of an even louder crash, the bookshelf toppled over from Nogizaka-san's spinning attack. And then, the toppled shelf hit the one beside it, and the one beside it toppled over onto another shelf.....the bookshelves toppled one by one like dominoes.

In the space of a few short seconds, all the bookshelves had toppled over.

"..."

In a mere instant, the library had become ground zero.

Erm.....

What just happened? I frantically tried to piece together the chronology of events.

What I see now is a library floor that's completely covered with books, making it look like a library from hell, and Nogizaka-san, who's never gotten into a fight her whole life, but had boldly smashed her way towards the bookshelf, plus her personal belongings that were spread out all over the floor.

What am I doing here?

Though I had blanked out for a moment there, I suddenly remembered what I was doing when I looked at all the things on the floor. That's right, I was trying to help Nogizaka-san pick up her personal belongings.

Nogizaka-san didn't seem to be hurt, so I wanted to help her pick everything up. And the first book that I picked up was that magazine by my feet!!!

---I finally found out the reason behind Nogizaka-san's panic.

"..."

"..."

There was an anime-style picture with a girl who had hair the color of the sky, something that could never be achieved through natural genetic inheritance, and a pair of biologically impossible large and sparkling eyes. The girl was smiling as she grabbed the hem of her skirt lightly with her fingers.

Below the picture was an overly photoshopped caption which read 「INNOCENT SMILE in bold and think yellow letters.

"This..."

I was speechless for a moment. This...was definitely the magazine that Nobunaga was talking about. But, why would Nogizaka-san want to borrow this book...

I had no time to continue my line of thought before a surprising voice entered my ears.

"Sob...sob...I've been seen, I've been seen!"

I only realized that the situation was serious when I saw that it was the sound of Nogizaka-san crying.

Due to the commotion, a few students from the art room had already gathered at the library.

"It's all over.....sob..."

Nogizaka-san was still crying.

Actually, in this kind of situation, I felt that I should be the one that it was 'all over' for.

The stares from the surrounding students were sharp and piercing, turning the library into a much more dangerous place. Though there were only four or five students from the art room at the scene, their looks made me feel like I was the kind of contemptible man who extorted money from his girlfriend until she couldn't take it anymore and wanted a break-up, whereupon I bullied her until she cried. That kind of look was extremely uncomfortable to bear.

"What's happening? Aren't those two dating? -whisper whisper-"

"They are? But the guy looks like he doesn't really care about what's happening? -whisper whisper-"

"Was he the one who pushed down all the bookshelves ? -whisper whisper-"

"Isn't he Ayase-kun of class 1? -whisper whisper-"

Listening to the contents of the whisperings, the only bright spot was that they hadn't realized that the crying girl was Nogizaka Haruka.

"The girl must have been begging him not to abandon her when he pushed her into the bookshelves."

"How could he! That's despicable!"

"Enemy of all women!"

"Detestable man!"

They were really going overboard here.

But from an objective point of view, it really did look like I had made Nogizaka-san cry, because that was practically the only possibility that could be inferred from the situation in the library, so I couldn't really blame the whispering students either.

In a nutshell, one thing was certain.

And that was, if I continued to stay at the scene of the crime, my bad reputation would be the talk of the entire school by tomorrow morning.

That's why...

With reference to the wisdom passed down by our ancestors, it was time to make a retreat! Therefore I picked up the stuff scattered all over the floor at breakneck speed, grabbed the hand of Nogizaka-san, who was still crying, and ran for our dear lives!! In truth...

We really were running for our lives!! From the library that is. From behind us...

"Ah! They've escaped!"

"He's kidnapping her?"

"They're eloping?"

"It should be the former, it's obvious that it's the former."

Those few lines were slightly better. But, why must they see me as the villain? I haven't done anything wrong .

Even I felt like crying, but when compared to a woman's tears that are like pearls, a man's tears are merely salt water. Other than the ability to melt slugs, salt water was practically useless.

But...why did it turn out like this?

I sighed deeply as I tried to look for a place where we wouldn't be seen. My feelings right now were heavier than a meat-cow that was being sent to the slaughterhouse.

Because of this...

I, who had been accused of breaking the law and of being a detestable man, finally made it out of the library with Nogizaka-san in tow, coming to a stop on the roof

of the school. To someone without an exceptional brain like me, this was the only place I could think of which could let us talk in peace and not be seen.

Nogizaka-san had already stopped crying...but right now, she still wore a blank expression as her shoulders continued to shiver, giving an impression that was completely different from the perfect 'Nuit Étoile', as she appeared to be infinitely delicate. I had never noticed that Nogizaka-san was actually so petite.

There was only one reason behind Nogizaka-san's panic.

And that was the copy of 「INNOCENT SMILE that I held in my left hand.

Because everything happened so fast, I had no time to organize my thoughts. But after calming down and thinking about it, I understood why she was in such a panic.

Which is to say...

"Nogizaka-san...You're an otaku..."

Nogizaka-san gave a start at my words. Bingo! Looks like I was right!

Which means that the incident at lunch break was only her reaction to Nobunaga's reference to 「INNOCENT SMILE. But no, now is not the time to be analyzing her actions calmly.

Nogizaka-san was extremely depressed.

Looks like Nogizaka-san was extremely bothered by the fact that someone knew that she was an otaku, but it was indeed extremely surprising.

Normal people would be more condemning with regards to the different hobbies of a small group of people, but there were so many of such things in Nobunaga's room that it made you want to vomit (literally), so I don't really mind these kind of things.

"Erm, Nogizaka-san..."

I decided to move on.

"...Mm?"

A flash of fear suddenly cut across Nogizaka-san's dull-looking eyes.

"Erm...I've already forgotten everything that I saw today."

"Huh?"

Nogizaka-san, who was looking like a wilted flower, finally perked up a little.

"I'm not saying that I don't care about you.....but you seem to be extremely disturbed about this incident, right? So I'll forget everything that has happened today, I won't tell anyone about this, and I won't mention it in front of you either, so you don't need to worry."

"..."

After listening to my long sentence, Nogizaka-san had a stunned expression on her face, looking like a deer that was going to be shot by a hunter. Did I say anything weird?

"..."

For a while, Nogizaka-san stopped moving. Hmm... this looks bad, and it could become even worse if I don't try to cheer her up. Just as I started to think of ways to do that...

"Ayase-kun, please do not take me for an idiot, and please do not look at me with such a strange gaze."

Nogizaka-san spoke.

"Strange gaze? What do you mean?"

"Well.....Because.....most people are openly disapproving of this kind of hobby. So..."

Maybe she had thought of something, which was why Nogizaka-san would say this kind of thing. Openly disapproving? Though there was some truth in that, but...

"I understand what you're trying to say, but...even if you have that kind of hobby, a normal person is still a normal person, a strange person is still a strange person. That's why I don't believe in judging a person by their hobbies."

Nobunaga is the best example. He's the perfect embodiment of an otaku, and though he is a bit...strange, he's definitely not a bad person, or I wouldn't have been his best friend for more than ten years.

"But...But..."

Nogizaka-san still had a worried look on her face. Hmm...How should I explain this?

"What I mean is, even if you have this kind of hobby, you're still you, right? That won't change, so you don't have to think about it so much."

"I'm...still myself?"

Nogizaka-san stuttered a reply.

"That's right! To be honest, being an otaku is just another hobby. In the end, I just think that it's an accompanying gift of a person's character. Because the nature of that gift differs from one person to the next, it's merely a small part of a person's character. A person's most important part shouldn't be here, should it? And..."

"...And what?"

"Hmm...I don't really know how to say this. But when I found out that you have a side that no one else knows about, I felt that it was really interesting..."

"Huh..."

"Or maybe I should say that I feel that I've gotten a little closer to you, so I'm happy..."

Nogizaka-san's face was beet-red.

Although my words seemed to be nonchalant, it was a true reflection of my feelings.

But Nogizaka-san seemed to be seriously listening to my words.

"You're probably the first person to say this to me."

Probably? If not for this chance encounter, I didn't think I'd say something like this to the 'Nuit Étoile' either.

"Anyway, that's how it is, so I don't think you need to be too bothered by it."

Seeing that Nogizaka-san had calmed down, I passed the magazine to her, patted her lightly on the shoulder,

and left the roof of the school building. I walked down the stairs, changed shoes at the lobby, and walked out of the school gate, finally able to move freely again.

I lectured Nogizaka Haruka.

I actually lectured Nogizaka-san with a mountain of extremely weird talk. Something which I really regret doing now, because I actually lectured a classmate with whom I had barely exchanged two sentences with before. Looks like I'm the weird one here. But it was all over now, and there was no point thinking about how I regret doing it.

In conclusion, my relationship with Nogizaka Haruka should probably stop here shouldn't it?

No matter how you look at it, she's the prettiest girl in school, she's an extremely smart girl with brilliant academic results, and also the daughter of one of the wealthiest families in Japan, while I'm an average common citizen. Even if I do know that Nogizaka-san has her panicky moments, even if that has brought me closer to her, to be honest, we're still two people from completely different worlds. Today's incident was merely an accidental crossing of two parallel lines.

At least, that was what I had thought at that time.

2

Over the next few days, nothing of particular importance happened.

Nogizaka-san was still the school's most unattainable girl, while I continued to stumble through school. Rushing into class before the first bell rang, fighting against the sleep demon during lessons, chatting with Nagai and the others for a few minutes after lessons, either going to the arcade or listening to Nobunaga's endless fountain of otaku knowledge after school. I didn't have any goal in life, and I've never had a lifelong dream either. Though my everyday life was boring, it was extremely stable; it was the average life that I loved.

But within these unchanging days, I realized that one thing had changed.

And that was...

From that day onwards, the times which my gaze settled on Nogizaka-san has increased. In the classroom, I suddenly realized that I was staring at her. Hmm...Just what is happening?

"About that, I think that's called love."

"Argh!?"

Nobunaga's idiotic face suddenly appeared from the side.

"Yo! Yuuto! Let's eat lunch together!"

"When...When did you get here?"

I didn't feel his presence at all.

"Heh heh, stealth is one of my 48 special abilities!"

I've known this fellow for more than ten years, and still do not know everything about him...oh well, its not like I want to anyway.

Going back to the main topic.

"Love? Nobunaga, what do you mean?"

"Gaining and losing, unable to differentiate between what's true and what's not, that's a person in love."

I know that, but my situation's not like that.

"I would advise you not to have any ideas about the ' Nuit Étoile'."

Nobunaga ignored my response as he pulled up a chair from a neighboring table to sit in front of me while he began to speak.

"How should I put this...For someone like you, she's in another league. Hmm...it's just that your social statuses are different!"

"Hmm."

"Yuuto, I don't think you know this, but in the time span of a little more than a year that she has entered this school, the number of people who have confessed their love for the 'Nuit Étoile' was, 94 people in total, 78 guys and 16 girls, about 20% of our school's population, while the number of people who have been rejected was also 94 , which means that there is a 100% chance of getting rejected. An extremely scary statistic isn't it!"

My god...I know that Nogizaka-san was popular, but 16 girls? What's the meaning of that? Girls! And why would this guy have such detailed information on his hands?

"This kind of information gathering is one of the mandatory skills required of the modern man. I could also tell you the basic personal information of the 'Nuit Étoile', hmm...Nogizaka Haruka, 16 years-old, born on the 20th of October, 155cm tall, excels at every subject, does not have a weak subject, has a grandfather, her parents, and a sister that's 3 years her junior in her immediate family..."

Nobunaga read off a notebook-like contraption that he fished out of his pocket...when did he become a stalker?

"Hey, don't look at me like I'm some kind of pervert, that's really rude of you! I'm not interested in real-life girls, for 2D girls are better, the most special of them being the cat-maid with a tail....."

I didn't even ask him about that kind of thing, as even if I were to retort, it would be obvious that we were on a different wavelength.

"And in such an information-laden time, anyone would be able to find out such information. This is a digitalized society, though there's a law regarding the protection of personal privacy, as long as one has the will , it's extremely easy to extract such information. Just tell

me if you need information regarding other people. I know just about everything about everyone in school."

Nobunaga told me as he smiled generously.

...This person's dangerous! I've got to avoid having him as my enemy!

"This is just my personal opinion! It's lamentable, but if you were to attempt to woo the 'Nuit Étoile', I think your chance of failure is 99.9%. According to my sources, even the basketball team captain, Sasaoka-senpai, was one of the rejected. He's actually a man-made hunk who had gone for plastic surgery, so if even someone like him got rejected, you..."

"...Don't look at me with that glimmer of pity in your eyes!"

"No, I'm not saying that you're not good or anything, it's just that you've chosen the hardest opponent of all. I just wanted to warn you that the 'Nuit Étoile' is the strongest opponent in our school."

Nobunaga shrugged as he smiled,

"But, no matter what you decide to do, I'll support you since we're childhood friends."

It's really disgusting to be described as 'childhood friends' by another guy. No, that's not the point.

"...I've never thought of wooing Nogizaka-san."

"Really?"

What are you so suspicious about! I've never told anyone about this from the start.

"Since you said it, let's not talk about this anymore. But , have you heard this phrase before?"

Nobunaga had a wise expression on his face as he continued,

" 'To start to care is to start to fall in love!' By Asakura Nobunaga."

Just where did he get that from! I've never heard that!

I don't know if it was the influence of Nobunaga's words, but the frequency with which I looked at Nogizaka-san actually increased after that conversation. During lessons, after lessons, after school, as long as I had the chance, I would look for her. This is bad, I seem to have contracted some serious disease.

A few more days passed after that.

This incident happened one morning two weeks after that day.

3

"We're going to conduct a check on personal belongings now, so please take out everything from your bag!"

The form teacher's, Tanabe Shigeo (38 years-old, male, single), words caused a stir in the classroom. While it was a mandatory check, it was understandable that the students were still unhappy about it.

"Be quiet! I'll be checking the guys, while Kamishiro-sensei will be checking the girls."

Kamishiro-sensei is our assistant-form teacher, and a light music teacher who had only just graduated from an all-girls university last year. She didn't put on any airs, was well-liked by her students, and was also extremely pretty. She's pretty, cute, and her figure's.....Hmm? I seem to have deviated from the main topic.

Speaking of which, I immediately thought of one thing when I heard that there was going to be a check.

It can't be that much of a coincidence can it? Nogizaka-san can't be holding that book right now, right ?

The time limit for borrowing a book from our school library was two weeks. If she had really held the book until the last day, then she would have to return it today. No, she can't be that unlucky!!

I nonchalantly looked behind me, and saw that Nogizaka-san's face had gone ashen, looking as though she was the victim of a murder.

....Ah, she must be holding the book right now.

"Please endure the check for a while more, it's finishing soon."

As per the instructions of Kamishiro-sensei, the female students began to place their personal belongings on their desks, as Nogizaka-san could only do the same with a helpless look in her eyes. I seemed to have caught a glimpse of the magazine that I had seen two weeks ago hidden among the textbooks and music scores on her table.

What should I do?

I thought about it, and I shouldn't do anything, since it's not like I'm not obliged to help her or anything.

But...

The image of Nogizaka-san crying from two weeks ago suddenly flashed across my mind. Even though I've already seen her uncontrollable sobbing, if that were to repeat itself in front of the entire class, just what kind of situation would it result in? Hmm...I didn't even dare to imagine it, but I know that it wouldn't be pretty for the pampered daughter of a wealthy family like Nogizaka-san to react to this kind of sudden event. She probably wouldn't even know what to do.

Was there really no way around it? No matter if it was a mud boat or the Titanic, she had already boarded the vessel, so I should be doing something to help her. But just as I realized that the opponent was Kamishiro-sensei, I couldn't think of any plan of attack. Two negatives make a positive, there must be a way, I can't miss this opportunity!

God, why is my brain so slow to react in the morning!

I raised my hand to speak.

"I...My stomach really hurts, may I make a trip to the washroom?"

"What's wrong? Did you eat too much for breakfast? Never mind, since you've passed the check already, you may go."

The 38 year-old Tanabe Shigeo obnoxiously said something which implied that he didn't care about his students at all. As he made his way around the desks of his students, I thought that the reason behind the fact that he still hasn't gotten married was due to his character...Oh well, it's not like it's any business of mine. I pretended to be in pain as I slanted my body while walking towards the exit of the classroom, passing by Nogizaka-san's seat in the process.

"I'm sorry."

"Huh?"

After saying that to Nogizaka-san, who was on the verge of tears, I pretended to trip on a bag on the floor as I deliberately fell towards her table.

"Eh? Ah!"

The table fell over as the textbooks, scores and other stuff that were on it flew onto the floor as well. Together with Nogizaka-san's low scream, her surroundings descended into chaos.

"Nogizaka-san, are you alright?"

"Ayase, get lost!"

"All you do is to get in the way of others! You better get away from Nogizaka-san this instant!"

My classmates started shouting at me from all corners of the classroom. How could it be that not even one of them cared about my condition?

"Ayase-kun. What are you doing!?"

Kamishiro-sensei walked over. She probably didn't see it.

"Sorry, I was trying to get to the washroom as soon as possible when I tripped."

"You're always so rash. Alright, just carry on and leave this to me."

"Sorry to trouble you."

I nodded towards Kamishiro-sensei, who had a conspiratorial smile on her face, and hurried out of the classroom.

I walked along the corridor to the washroom, clutching my stomach with one hand.

There shouldn't be a stalker hiding in the men's toilet right now, but for the sake of secrecy, I confirmed that there wasn't anyone else in the washroom before taking out a rectangular object from the inside of my uniform. No prizes for guessing the correct answer, of course it was the 「INNOCENT SMILE. The blue-haired girl on the cover was still smiling happily. Phew, at least I successfully smuggled it out!

"This is..."

Just as I was congratulating myself, I suddenly realized that there was something else beneath the magazine, an expensive-looking green book. This is a book of musical scores, one of those that was on

Nogizaka-san's table. Looks like in my hurry to smuggle the magazine out of the classroom, I had taken something else out along with it.

"Composed by Franz Liszt. Erster Mephisto-Walzer No. 1, S514"

Such a resounding name for a piece. The Waltz of Mephisto. I flipped the book open, only to find that its interior was covered with musical symbols which I didn't understand. Wow.

She's too brilliant! I don't know anything about playing the piano. But in that moment, I already knew that this wasn't a piece that an average high school student could play. Which was why I could only stand there in awe of Nogizaka-san's piano prowess.

I carefully closed the thick score that once again reminded me of how perfect Nogizaka-san is.

At that moment, something strange loomed up in the corner of my vision.

"..."

This is a drawing right? A horrific-looking villain with the eyes of a bloodthirsty bear was drawn in one corner of the piano score. He was holding a conductor's baton in one hand, while in a speech bubble beside him contained , 'please remember not to play at too fast a tempo at this part♪', written in pink ink. In the stark contrast between the picture and the contents of the speech bubble, the reminder appeared to be extremely impish.

But the bear really wasn't drawn very nicely, as it also looked like a man-eating wolf, or a large bloodhound, or a failed clone of Godzilla. As for the object that it held in its hand, it looked like a saber, a police baton, or even an ill-designed lightsaber.

To be honest, that drawing was extremely bad. So bad that a kindergarten kid with a little bit of talent in the arts would be able to draw something better.

"...I'll just pretend that I didn't see it!"

After mulling it over, I felt that this was the wisest course of action. There are a lot of things in the world that are best left hidden and not known to mankind. See no evil.

After looking at it for a while more, I quietly closed the score.

After school, Kamishiro-sensei called me to the office.

She seemed to have seen through my act in the morning.

"You hid something at that time didn't you?"

Kamishiro-sensei crossed her legs in a way that would desolate the eyes of innocent youths as she asked. Against this sort of opponent, that the ill-conceived trick would be seen through shouldn't be much of a surprise. So I thought about how best to answer the question.

"Hmm...I admit that I hid something, but I assure you, it wasn't anything contraband. It was an object that would bring great distress to a teenage girl, which was why I took such a drastic and rash measure to solve the problem."

I just gave an answer that even I didn't understand, but Kamishiro-sensei gave a devilish smile as though I just sold my soul to her.

"I believe you. You were trying to protect Haruka, right?"

"No, about this..."

"Am I wrong?"

"Ugh..."

It seems like...she's seen through everything. It's true that aged ginger is more pungent, so I should just keep my mouth shut for now.

"Alright you don't have to give me the details, so let's just put this matter behind us. Mm...it must be nice to be young and so full of energy. The exuberant youthfulness of the E generation, if only I was five years younger!"

Kamishiro-sensei's eyes sparkled with an unearthly light, she seemed to be rather happy. Though she seemed

to have misunderstood something, but any attempts to explain the situation would probably fall on deaf ears, so I decided not to act rashly.

"It's true that one should experience every type of situation while one's still young, like dating two girls at once or a triangular relationship, anything goes! If you don't play your cards properly, you could even get into a 6-way relationship..."

And this was how I spent the next five minutes.

After Kamishiro-sensei finally snapped out of her own world, she uncrossed and crossed her legs again before continuing our conversation.

"Hmm, I don't have anything else to say to you, you can go now...Ah, wait a moment, I remembered something. Yuu-chan, do you know where my cellphone is? I lost it after I went to borrow some music scores during lunch break."

"How would I know the location of your cellphone..."

"Really? Actually, I was thinking that you had hidden it! Good boys also have times when they want to play bad, it's the special psychology of teenage boys..."

"I categorically deny that."

"If you say it so seriously, onee-san will be sad you know..."

"..."

I retorted softly.

"Ah, such a cruel retort, but I'm not bluffing...I really forgot where I put it, it's really strange. Oh well, I'll just continue looking for it, I'll think of something else if I really can't find it."

"You really do know how to act blur..."

Though I'm hardly one to say that, but,

"Really? Hmm! Haruka and you...To be honest, the two of you are a surprising couple."

"No, we're not dating..."

I retorted immediately, she really had misunderstood our relationship.

"It's alright, there's no point hiding it, onee-chan knows everything already."

"It's not a question of hiding it or not...she's the 'Nuit Étoile'! I'm not good enough for her, so this is all just a misunderstanding."

However.

"An inter-caste love relationship! So touching..."

God, this person isn't absorbing anything I'm telling her.

"...You haven't changed one bit, Yukari."

As expected of my sister's friend, for people who aren't dense enough will never be able to make friends with my sister...But why am I surrounded by such dense people! Nobunaga, the three idiots, Yukari, and my sister. Is this what they call 'birds of a feather flock together'? I really don't want to go down that line of thought.

"Hey, please call me Kamishiro-sensei when in school."

In that moment, I remembered that I had the habit of calling other people by their given names.

"I'm alright with anything, Sen---sei."

Under the influence of the pleading brown-colored eyes of Kamishiro-sensei, I lost the power to retort. Oh well, since this incident's over, I can go back to the classroom. But just as I prepared to walk back to my classroom, Yukari suddenly put on an expression that middle-aged obasan's have when they're preparing to sexually harass their female colleagues and happily told me,

"Saito-sensei's out on official business today, and the bed in the infirmary is empty! Work hard! Young man!"

I just walked out of the teacher's office when I saw Nogizaka-san standing there.

She stood there quietly, like the only lily in a garden full of tulips, though a little conservative, but still different from the rest.

"Ah..."

Nogizaka-san fiddled with her white hairband when she saw me as she stepped forward, looking as though she had something to say.

She stood there for a while before finally making up her mind,

"Umm...Ayase-kun..."

Her pink lips parted to say something, but...

"Ah! Isn't that the 'Nuit Étoile'?"

A voice rudely interrupted her.

"Where?"

"Look! There!"

On the other end of the corridor, there were a few guys who were pointing in our direction and talking among themselves.

"It's true, and some guy is trying to flirt with her."

"What!? A guy?"

One of the guys gave a murderous shout.

To be honest, after so much had happened, I had almost forgotten that Nogizaka-san was a famous person in school. A famous person like her talking face to face with a serious-looking guy (me) outside the teacher's office was extremely noticeable.

"What!? The 'Nuit Étoile'?"

"And a guy?"

"What's the matter? Just what is happening?'

Other than the loud voices of the group of guys, even the other students who were passing by had stopped and were looking at us curiously, some even moving closer to get a better look. In a few moments, the two of us had been completely surrounded by people.

Hmm...

The popularity of the 'Nuit Étoile' was extremely scary , so much so that we couldn't even hold a conversation in peace in public.

For the first time in my life, I realized that personal privacy was actually so worthless and meaningless. Though it's not my place to give out such lamentations,

Because 120% of those guys' interest was on Nogizaka-san and not on me.

Just as I was thinking about that, more and more people started to arrive. I looked around me...about twenty or even thirty people had already gathered, just where did all these people come from?

Anyway, it would be suicide to continue staying here. Under the watchful eyes of so many people, we won't be able to speak to each other properly.

Since it has come down to this, there was only one way of resolving this.

"Nogizaka-san, let's go."

"Ah?"

I pulled Nogizaka-san, who had a dazed expression on her face like a duckling who has just been born, away from the scene. It's so strange! Why am I always running whenever I'm together with Nogizaka-san?

"Hey, that fellow actually dared to flirtatiously drag the 'Nuit Étoile' by her hand!"

"What!? By her hand?"

Just as we ran through the layers of human walls around us to escape, angry shouts sounded from the surrounding crowd.

"Damn! Don't run away!"

"Unforgivable..."

"Damn it, I've remembered his face! The next time I see him, I'll tie him up and hang him upside down from the roof!"

My god, those are such extreme words, I even started to hallucinate, as I thought I saw a group of people putting on red headbands that read 'Protect Haruka-sama~ The Nuit Étoile Protection Force~'.

.....Those should be the hallucinations generated by my own mind.

Once again, we came to the rooftop.

The only difference was that this time, Nogizaka-san wasn't the one crying, though I felt like I was going to. Looks like the legendary secret fan club really exists, I should get Nobunaga to dig up some information on them. I do not want to be the public enemy number one of these people, for if I don't take the appropriate actions, I might really be hung upside down from the rooftop.

As I thought about the fanclub members, all of whom had looked at me murderously, I felt extremely depressed.

I finally understood the extent of Nogizaka-san's popularity. It was rumored that Nogizaka-san's fan club membership was a three digit value, and it looked to be true. In the context of our school population, a three digit value would be equal to roughly a quarter of the entire

school population. In other words (including girls), of every four students in our school, one is a supporter of Nogizaka-san. That's a bit too terrifying isn't it?

Nogizaka-san was panting loudly beside me due to fatigue, which wasn't a surprise, given the long distance that we ran to get here.

After Nogizaka-san's breathing had become more even , I opened my mouth to speak.

"Did.....Did you have something to say to me?"

Actually I could already guess what Nogizaka-san would want to say.

"Yes I do, about this morning's incident....."

After she stopped panting, Nogizaka-san finally lifted up her head.

As I expected! That would be the only reason why Nogizaka-san would come looking for me.

Even though it's a bit sad to say that, but.....

"Ah, I'm really sorry for lunging at you so suddenly in the morning."

As I said that, Nogizaka-san became a little nervous.

"Eh? That.....That was very nice.....No! It wasn't nice, but....."

So was it nice or was it not nice?

Nogizaka-san suddenly lowered her head like a dove, her slightly messy hair moving along with the movement of her head. At this point in time, the soft and silky fragrance of her hair was blown over.

"I'm really grateful to you. That time.....You were helping me, weren't you?"

"It's nothing!"

You could say that I was helping her, or you could say that I just couldn't leave her like that, because I know Nogizaka-san's secret!

Nogizaka-san giggled.

"Ayase-kun, you're a really nice guy."

"Nice guy..."

Normally, by saying that the guy is a nice guy, the girl usually means 'you're a hopeless nice guy', so it wasn't anything to be happy about. But since it came from Nogizaka-san, she probably doesn't mean it that way!

"Anyway, I want to thank you for helping me. I'm grateful for you helping me keep the fact that I borrowed the 「INNOCENT SMILE a secret...And I'm really sorry.. ....Because of me, you got called to the teacher's office."

She bowed her head in apology again.

"It's nothing, don't think too much about it. It was Kamishiro-sensei who called me to the office, so it's nothing!"

"But..."

"It's alright, I wasn't scolded or anything!"

Finally convinced after my repeated explanations, Nogizaka-san finally raised her head again.

"Ayase-kun, thank you for all your help."

Nogizaka-san gave me a shy smile. Hmm.....If she continues in this vein, I'll start to feel embarrassed too.

Which was why I decided to change the topic.

"Oh right, I gotta return this to you."

After checking to make sure that no one was around, I took out 「INNOCENT SMILE and the music score.

"Ah, Ayase-kun, you even took away the music score."

"I used too much force when I was trying to hide 「INNOCENT SMILE! This piece of music looks really difficult, are you able to play it?"

I asked Nogizaka-san who was for an instant slightly embarrassed.

"Yes... it's the piece I'm currently practicing, so I'm almost able to play the entire piece."

I nodded. So she can play it after all. As the name of the piece, 「The Waltz of Mephisto suggests, this wasn't a piece that normal people would be able to play, but she could.

Just as I was filled with awe at her piano prowess, Nogizaka-san suddenly thought of something, and abruptly looked up at me...

"So.....could it be that you looked inside?"

Nogizaka-san's voice carried a tinge of uneasiness, as though saying that I saw something.

"I.....Didn't I drew a lot of drawings in it?"

She looked up at me.

"Ah.....That's right....."

That man-eating bear who looked like it just killed two of three people! Because the visual impact was too jarring , I remembered that drawing in exquisite detail, the drawing which would bring at least three days of nightmares to anyone who looks at it.

"I'm sorry, but I saw it...or rather, it ran into my line of sight, I merely glanced at it."

"S..so, you saw it?"

Nogizaka-san lowered her head. Hmm...that really was something that I shouldn't have seen, it was forbidden fruit! Just as I was frantically trying to think of a way to get over this awkward atmosphere, Nogizaka-san surprised me with her next sentence.

"What do you think of it?"

"Huh?"

What do you mean?

"That is.....it's quite nice isn't it? It's the first time anyone has seen my drawings"

Nogizaka-san's eyes sparkled when she said that, her expression showing the confidence she had in her drawing skills. Don't tell me.....that she's asking for my opinion? I never thought that things would turn out like this.

'The main source of nourishment of that bear seems to be humans'...That doesn't sound like a compliment. 'The bear's eyes make it look like it's sniffing drugs'...that's definitely not a compliment. 'If we were to put that bear into a hot pot, it'll probably be very delicious'...I really didn't how I should phrase my answer.

After mulling it over...

"The bear's gaze is extremely evil...no, or rather, it's very piercing. Everyone's perspective is different, so I suppose some people would find it very cute..."

In the end, my polite and invincible compliment was shattered by Nogizaka-san's response.

"...Hmm? Bear? But that's a cat!"

Nogizaka-san tilted her head as though asking, just what are you talking about.

"..."

"..."

"...Ah, you're absolutely right, it's a cat."

A cat?

I honestly didn't knew that it was a cat. Because a normal cat wouldn't have fangs would it?

"Umm...Uh...It's really creative to let the cat hold a conductor's baton!!"

"...It's supposed to be a cat toy!"

"..."

"..."

"Ah, that's right, it's a cat toy."

The book is a music score, and adding those two things sure add a new perspective.

Luckily, Nogizaka-san didn't seem to have heard my soundless murmurings.

"It's embarrassing to say it myself, but I'm rather confident about that piece of art!"

Nogizaka-san continued.

"..."

Is she serious?

I stared at Nogizaka-san.

The look in her eyes was extremely serious.

There was no look in the world that could be more serious than that.

"..."

Well, no point picking out her faults, no one's perfect after all!

"...Hmm, that's a really creative and outstanding piece of work, I like it! I think I see a hint of Picasso's 「Guernica in it."

I expressed my own opinions very tactfully, but this was already the best I could say.

"Really? I'm so happy!"

Looking at the joy expressed on Nogizaka-san's innocent face, I felt a sense of guilt weighing down on me . At least I wasn't lying.

"I'm really really happy! I'm glad I asked for your opinion!"

"Righ.....Right....."

I'm glad she didn't ask somebody other than me.

"Well.....then please take good care of me in the future !"

"?"

What?

"I think I'll improve faster if I show it to other people. I've always been practicing alone, but its hard to improve like this...Of course, only if you have the time..."

"..."

Was she planning to show me these satanic drawings that bring down nightmares and summon demons on a regular basis?

"What.....What do you think?"

"...About this....."

"You don't want to?"

I didn't give an immediate answer and Nogizaka-san's expression immediately turned to one reminiscent of a puppy that had been abandoned by the roadside. That expression is a banned technique, for no one can reject the 'Nuit Étoile' or let the 'Nuit Étoile' put on such an expression. Furthermore, that Nogizaka-san would implore me like this is because I'm the only one who knows about this hobby of hers.....I didn't have a choice, for I'm stuck between a rock and a hard place, and I really think that I've boarded the Titanic.

"If you don't mind, I'm willing to discuss it with you anytime."

I deliberately pitched my voice higher so as to impress upon my sincerity.

"Really!"

Nogizaka-san gave a blissful smile. God, I think I'll lose a hundred days of my life everytime I see this smile in the future...oh well, no point thinking about that now.

After that, for a long period of time (at least 30 minutes), I was listening to Nogizaka-san talk about her passion for drawing.

"I have to go now, thank you very much for today. After I finish some new drawings, I'll show them to you again. I'll be going first."

Because of her piano lesson, Nogizaka-san left first. She was in extremely high spirits, humming the tune of 「Für Elise as she walked.

Looking at her receding figure, I couldn't help but mutter to myself.

"...Have I acted too rashly...?"

4

That night, I was studying in my room when an exaggeratedly loud voice came from downstairs.

"Hey! Yuuto! You've got a call!"

I was slightly miffed at being interrupted just as I was getting into the rhythm of my English-Japanese translation homework, but my sister was in a worse mood, ready to explode at any moment.

"I said, you've got a call!!!"

She kicked the door to my room open!! She even took down one of the door hinges along with her kick!! And then she stomped into my room.

The tall person who entered my room.

"Ruko..."

My sister (A karate second-dan holder, but often abuses her martial arts skills. In the Ayase household where my parents are rarely at home, she has the highest

authority) appeared to be extremely unhappy, like an Asian black bear woken up from its slumber during winter time.

She only wore a white shirt on top of her underwear, such a disgraceful appearance.

"How could she wake me up from my sweet slumber! I don't know who she is, but you better teach her a lesson and tell her not to call in the middle of the night!"

Middle of the night? It's only ten! Though it wasn't early, but it wasn't that late either. And what did she mean by 'teach her a lesson'? Shouldn't she say lecture or something!

I knew that retorting was useless, but I still gave it a try.

"Whatever makes you happy, since both mean 'input' in one way or another."

Those two phrases are completely different! They have totally different meanings!

But to Ruko, who was even lazier and more perfunctory than me, those two phrases really weren't

that different. She gave an irritated expression as she glared at me.

"...You're really annoying! Just answer the phone will you! I'm so sleepy.....I'm going to sleep now, so you better remember to unplug the phone after you finish your conversation! "

Ruko threw the phone over to me before going through the door that was swinging on only one of its hinges.

For the love of God! Who'd have believed that she's actually the secretary for the CEO of a top-class firm, which goes to show that anything can happen in this society of ours. It was indeed the state of affairs that beautiful women would always have their way. Though my sister is pretty, I don't really want to comment on her character. For a society that is perpetually harping on equality, we're extremely unfair.

I thought of all this as I answered the phone.

"Hello?"

And then...

"Ah, hello? Is this Ayase-kun? It's Nogizaka."

A surprising voice came from the other end of the line, the female voice that had the power to calm anyone who hears it, one that I've been hearing quite a lot of recently. But right now, this voice sounded extremely serious, nothing like the cheerful one I had heard in the day. Something must have happened.

"I'm really sorry to disturb you at such a late hour. Umm...I would like to ask for a favor from you, Ayase-kun..."

A favor? My heart beat really fast at that word.

"...I'm really embarrassed to say this right now. But I know I'll regret it for life if I don't say it now."

The seriousness in that voice was mixed with a heavy dose of embarrassment. Could it be that? No, Nogizaka-san would never ask me to do something as absurd as imitating the way crickets walk upside-down.

"Erm.....Are you listening?"

"Ah, of, of course I'm listening."

I had no reason not to be listening.

"That's great...Ayase-kun, could you come out and meet me now?"

"Huh..."

After a second of lightning-quick analysis.....

"Meet up...just the two of us?'

"That's right."

To meet up at this time.....She can't be planning to have a secret date with me can she? The two of us sitting on a bench in the park. Time has stopped, and then the two of us.....No, I can't continue fantasizing! I'll start to think about contents similar to the plot in a third-grade novel if I continue fantasizing.

I shook my heard violently. Got to stay calm, got to stay calm, I have to keep my cool.

To return my heartbeat to normal, healthy levels, I mentally recited the multiplication table. At this time, Nogizaka-san continued,

"Actually...I would like you to accompany me to school."

"School?"

The school in question...would obviously be the Hakujo Academy that we both attend. Why would she pick such a time to go to school when there wasn't a late night dare challenge of any kind going on.....

".....The magazine...I forgot to return it."

The soft and hesitant voice cut off my line of thought.

"I had planned to return it after meeting Ayase-kun, but as I was feeling extremely happy after our conversation, I felt that I could return it a bit later.....and I forgot to return in the end."

"You're talking about.....that magazine?"

「INNOCENT SMILE

".....Yes."

"..."

The situation.....was really serious. The basic rules of our school were rather loose, but our school was extremely strict regarding the usage of school facilities. If a book that was borrowed from the library wasn't returned by the due date, the school would publicly remind the student through the PA system.

Of course, the public reminder would also include the student's name, year, and the name of the borrowed book .

"If I'm mentioned, I'll...sob..."

Probably thinking about what would happen if the book that she borrowed was publicly announced to the entire school, Nogizaka-san was whimpering slightly.

"Th, that's why I thought I'd go return it instead. *sniff* Bu, but going alone to school when it's this late...it's scary . So, I thought I'd ask somebody to go with me...B, but..."

Nogizaka-san said in a tearful voice.

So that's how it is. About this, I was the only one whom she could turn to for help. Because if she was to

look for someone else, she'd have to show them 「INNOCENT SMILE, bringing her hobby to the knowledge of one more person.

"Sob.....Is it too much to ask? I'm really sorry to always bother you like this, but..."

It wasn't her fault. And.....only a demented man would abandon a crying Nogizaka-san, right?

Therefore.

"Hmm...Let's just meet up at school now, alright?"

"Sob...Ah...?"

A surprised exclamation came from the other side of the line.

"You're willing.....to go with me?"

"Yup, since I've got nothing to do right now anyway."

It was decided. Though I haven't finished my English homework, that's not important at a moment like this! I would like to avoid both Nogizaka-san's tears and the scolding given by my English teacher (forty-two years

old, characteristic: Extremely annoying), but I don't have the time to deliberate any further on this.

"Thank you.....sob.....Thank you so much"

And that was how I decided to sneak into school at such an unearthly hour.

The campus was extremely creepy at night.

The thirty-something year-old white cement campus looked as thought it was floating in the sky in the dark, and from an angle, it really looked like an abandoned mansion, giving any observers a severe case of the goosebumps. This atmosphere was like the one in the supernatural shows on television where the spiritually-inclined guest appears and declares to the audience that 'an extremely evil aura can be felt here', whereupon the audience painfully wrestles with their inner-selves whether to continue watching or not. Nogizaka-san, who was standing next to me, was looking

at the campus with exactly the same expression on her face, looking as though she was about to burst into tears any moment.

Now, how should we go about infiltrating the campus ?

Of course the main gate wouldn't be open at this time, so perhaps we should try going by the staff entrance. Since it's the staff entrance, it should be near the teachers' office. But we'd have to be extremely careful if we were to go in by the staff entrance so as to avoid getting caught by a patrolling teacher. Or should we break a window and reach in to take the key, use a power tool to break the lock of the main gate, or just smash our way through the gate with a metal pole. Just that...all the above-mentioned methods were illegal.

Isn't there any way that's quieter? (Even though no matter how quiet an act of infiltration is, it's still an illegal act) Just as I was trying to come up with a better idea...

"Ayase-kun, this way."

Nogizaka-san pulled on my arm.

"We can get in by the back gate."

"Back gate.....why?"

"Because I have a backup key."

"A backup key?"

Why would she have something like that?

"The key was in my father's study, so I just borrowed it for a while, because I thought it might come in handy!"

So it was from her father's study...I seem to have understood something, but why would her father have a backup key of the school?

"I'm not very sure about the specifics...but it seems like my father donated a large amount of money to the school , and to prepare for emergencies, he asked for a backup of all the keys in the school."

Investment...Right, I've heard this before. Ever since Nogizaka-san came to study at this school, ninety percent of all the money donated to Hakujo Academy came from

the Nogizaka family. So it probably wouldn't be surprising if Nogizaka-san had a backup copy of all the keys in the school.....right?

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing....."

Now's not the time to voice my questions, but since she had the backup copies to all the keys in the school, she'd surely have the key to the main gate. Wouldn't it be much better to just go in by the main gate? But I didn't say that out loud.

"Let's go!"

"Yes!'

Because the library was on the second story, we walked in the direction of the stairs.

Not surprisingly, the interior of the school was also empty, and as silent as a cemetery.

"It's really creepy..."

Nogizaka-san said as she looked around the deserted corridor. She gripped the sleeve of my shirt tightly, not daring to let go for even a second.

"If this was a game, a zombie should be jumping out from this corner."

"Ah!!!"

I had played this game where you had to fight off hordes of zombies, giant spiders and other monstrosities while attempting to escape from a western-style building . For the first ten minutes of the game, you would probably feel like you're about to be devoured by two of three zombies, but...

Never mind, forget I said it, now's not the time to think about something like that.

"Ayase-kun, do you know about the seven mysteries of our school?"

As we neared the stairwell, Nogizaka-san suddenly mentioned that. The seven mysteries of the school,

though I'm not exactly sure as to the actual number of the mysteries, but there should be quite a few of them. Like...

There's the 'Thirteen steps of death to the rooftop'.

As for the others, I only know of the 'Dancing human figure in the science classroom', 'The self-playing piano in the music room', 'The self-bouncing ball in the empty gym'.

"There's still 'Hanako-san, who lives in the toilet' 'The big mirror in the infirmary that reflects the death of the user', and...'the dead book-reader'."

Nogizaka-san filled in the gaps.

"..."

An extremely bad premonition filled the air after hearing such rumors.

This was my first time hearing about 'The dead book-reader'. Since it has to do with a book-reader, it should be connected to the library right? And we just had to be going to the library at this time.

"..."

Should we just head back?

"Don't...Don't leave me behind!"

My arm was held in a vice-like grip by Nogizaka-san, who had tears rolling about in her eyes. Looks like I wouldn't be able to perform the 'great escape'.

During the time when I was struggling with myself about whether to run away or not, we reached the library in question. The wooden door that looked so normal in the day now looked like the gates to hell.

It was a really bad feeling.

"So...What's the story behind 'The dead book-reader'?"

I asked Nogizaka-san.

"A long long time ago, when the campus was still made of wood, there was a student who really liked to read. Because he was crazy about reading, so this student would go to the library every day, until one day, where he passed away after getting into an accident on his way to the library. But it's rumored that for the sake of reading, this student would still report to the library everyday, which is why in the dark and silent library, footsteps and the sound of a book dropping onto the ground can be heard, and the shadow of a reading figure can also be seen at the window."

"You really know a lot about that."

"We're going off track here, but I heard that someone really came down to the library in the middle of the night , and that book-reader really did appear in front of that person."

"..."

"I only heard this story the day before yesterday. So now.....I kind of regret hearing it..."

Nogizaka-san lowered her head. Even if she regrets hearing that story, it was already too late...

"...It'll probably be even worse if this story was told to someone who's never heard of it before."

"You're right.....It would be worse."

"I've never heard this story before."

"Huh...you..."

Nogizaka-san placed a finger at the edge of her mouth as she lapsed into deep thought.

"...So you're saying that...You just heard the story for the first time from me?"

"That's right."

"..."

"..."

The surroundings were deathly silent.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said all that."

Nogizaka-san apologized with a horrified expression on her face, just like a puppy who did something wrong and was getting scolded by its master. I believe that no one would be able to grumble even a word more after seeing her like this.

"Ah, it's alright, since you didn't do it on purpose."

And I was the one who was asked for the details in the first place.

"But, if you meet the dead book-reader and get murdered by him because of my words..."

Nogizaka-san's face was terribly pale as she fervently prayed that I would not become the victim of a supernatural murder!

"It'll be alright! The dead book-reader won't run out just because of your story! And my only redeeming feature is that I'm really tough, so I'd probably be able to survive a supernatural attack without much effort."

Because I have been forced to accept Ruko's rigorous training since I was young.

"But...the attack of a spirit...isn't a physical attack, but a mental one, like curses..."

"That's alright too."

Regarding mental attacks, besides Ruko's training, I've also been on the receiving end of a lot of training from Yukari. So my defensive ability against mental attacks would probably be even higher than my defensive ability against physical attacks. I'm not proud of this inhuman defensive capabilities of mine, but it's the unfortunate truth.

Nogizaka-san smiled as she squinted slightly, probably hinting that she accepts my answer?

"......You're really kind."

"No......I'm not that kind....."

Why would she suddenly say something like this?"

"Hehe!"

"No...That's..."

I wanted to deny it, but couldn't find the right words. To mask the fact that I was blushing, I turned my gaze to the direction of the library.

"Cough, though I can't deny that this library's really creepy...we still have to go in don't we?"

Once I said that, Nogizaka-san immediately nodded her head furiously with a serious expression on her face.

"Let's...Let's go!"

Even though Nogizaka-san was the one calling for us to go, she didn't move at all as she looked at me as if trying to send me some kind of telepathic message...she probably wants me to lead the way. Alright, let's do it!

I pushed open the gigantic wooden door to the library, the wooden frame creaking under the force exerted by my hands before it opened. On the other side of the door was...an empty library. If this was a horror film, then at the exact moment where the door was opened, we would have gone face to face with 'the dead book-reader', a worst-case scenario that I wanted to avoid at all costs. The atmosphere in the empty room seemed to be extremely sinister, as though a ghoulish white face would appear from behind the black-painted shelves any moment.

"You can't leave me. Please don't leave me alone, I'm begging you."

Nogizaka-san grabbed my arm tightly as she whimpered, a flowery smell making its way to my nostrils. In fact, she needn't have been so worried, since she was grabbing me so tightly that I wasn't even able to move.

"Ah, I'm sorry."

Nogizaka-san hurriedly let go of me, my body finally regaining its freedom of movement. But for some reason, I suddenly felt a trace of regret.

"Let's just maintain this position. Please don't leave me alone alright?"

Nogizaka-san looked up at me as she requested me to stay by her side while she held on to my arm. I nodded as we made our way towards the book-return counter.

It was about fifty meters to the counter, and we carefully made our way over.

During this short journey, Nogizaka-san's beautiful face almost touched mine a couple of time. Her alluring amber eyes, her exquisitely white skin, and her pink lips all made my heart beat faster after every close encounter. ..Is there a problem with the regularity of my heartbeat?

"Kya!"

Nogizaka-san seemed to have tripped over something. ..it should be the reading chair again, right? She lost her balance, but fortunately, she broke her fall just before her face was about to come into contact with the floor. That was close!

"Why is there a chair here..."

How could you say that when the chair's always been here, and you've already tripped over it once before already?

"I've embarrassed myself again, I'm so clumsy!"

She smiled embarrassingly before continuing to walk, but promptly tripped over another chair, and fell flat on the floor this time.

"..."

I was thinking, she can't be...

Nogizaka-san's a little...no, extremely dense.

"...I've been tripping over or running into things ever since I was young."

Nogizaka-san answered the question in my mind.

"I would be able to fall down even when walking on flat ground, and I've even walked into electrical poles and parked cars."

"You're not good at sports?"

But I had thought that she does quite well during physical education classes.

"Hmm.....I don't think this has got anything to do with physical ability."

"...I think you're right."

Was she really like this? I've never seen her trip over something or knock into something at school though.

"I'm usually extremely careful...but maybe it's because Ayase-kun has already seen me trip over something that I probably subconsciously let my guard down, leading to me to trip over more things."

Nogizaka-san smiled abashedly. Looks like she's been putting in a lot of effort to maintain her public image.

"...Ah, what have I been saying! We should quickly return the book!"

The red-faced Nogizaka-san suddenly remembered our mission and walked towards the book-returning counter, this time not tripping over anything. After

reaching the counter, Nogizaka-san immediately turned on the computer, which powered up with a whir as the monitor displayed the operating system.

"Hey, I suddenly thought of something."

"Thought of what?"

"Even if the book was returned now, won't the data be stored in the computer?"

It's a computer specially designed to handle the borrowing and returning of library books. Which is why the date and time of all transactions would definitely be recorded in the computer. To be more precise, in the hard-disk of the computer. It'll definitely show that on the twenty-second day of April, at 23:08, book number 1203 (INNOCENT SMILE) was returned to the library.

"..."

Nogizaka-san froze for five seconds.

"...I never thought of that."

Hey, Hey!

"Hmm...There's got to be a way. Let's think logically. Since no one in their right minds would return a book at this time, I would expect the librarian to assume that there's a problem with the data. People always look for a reason to explain such small and insignificant inconsistencies."

Maybe she's right. But I would never have guessed that she had this careless side to her.

"Please wait for a moment while I return the book."

Nogizaka-san concentrated on the computer in front of her after saying that.

I had nothing to do, so I couldn't help but look at Nogizaka-san, who had both eyes on the monitor.

Sleek, black hair, snowy white skin, under the weak light of the moon and the reflection of the light from the screen, her body was bathed in a bluish white light, making her look as mysterious as the Goddess of healing magic in legends. She's the beautiful, clever, dignified and musically talented 'Nuit Étoile'. But the string of compliments didn't seem to fit the girl standing in front of me.

Because my impression of Nogizaka-san isn't like this.

Before this, I had thought of Nogizaka-san as a calm and collected lady. And I'm sure the rest of my classmates would see her in the same way.

But right now, I finally understand why we can never judge a book by its cover.

Which daughter of a wealthy and powerful family would illegally infiltrate her own school just to return an otaku magazine?

And even crying while tripping over numerous things in front of another in the process, embarrassing herself by being extremely clumsy...

But, compared to the normally perfect Nogizaka-san, I felt that the Nogizaka-san that I was seeing right now was more 'human'. A much better feeling. But I guess I should keep such thoughts to myself! Because Nogizaka-san probably won't be happy with that, even if I thought this side of her was better.

"Nogizaka-san."

"Yes?"

Nogizaka-san didn't turn her gaze as she continued to operate the computer.

"Why did you start this hobby...I mean, how did you become an otaku?"

I finally asked that question! God, what have I said! I had already promised Nogizaka-san not to speak of this anymore.

"Hmm, how..."

Surprisingly, Nogizaka-san didn't seem to mind it at all as she answered my question.

"Actually, I'm not very sure myself, by the time I realized it, I was already an otaku. Just that...I'm quite sure that 'that' set off this whole hobby of mine."

She place a finger on the edge of her mouth as she thought about what 'that' was.

"This happened about six years ago. Because I quarreled with my parents over all the skills that I had to learn, I ran to a park near my house to cry. The reason for that quarrel should have been...I had promised some

friends to go and play together, but it clashed with my Japanese dance class so I couldn't go. That was the first time anyone had invited me out to play, so I was extremely happy, but I had to reject their invitation because my parents had enrolled me in the Japanese dance classes...I was really upset, so I ran out to the park to cry my heart out. I ignored the stares of people passing by and just wailed. I think I probably wanted someone to come over and comfort me, but this world wasn't as caring as I had thought it was. More than a few people walked past me, but they all ignored me, since a crying kid is really annoying. But...there was one person, just one person came over to talk to me."

Nogizaka-san had a faraway look in her eyes, as though she was looking at a distant place.

"Although he was a bit rough about it, he tried his best to comfort me. I still remember what happened as though it was yesterday. At that time...He let me read the first edition of 「INNOCENT SMILE."

Nogizaka-san continued in a slightly exaggerated tone.

"Before that, I had never read manga before, so it was a refreshing experience for me...In the flash of an eye, I was

enraptured by the magazine. People who read manga would feel very happy, and I was probably deeply attracted to that kind of atmosphere...And in the end, I even asked that person to give that first edition to me."

Nogizaka-san laughed.

Wow! What a touching story! How did that guy even thought of using the 「INNOCENT SMILE to comfort a primary school girl! This guy was incredible.

"That's probably the beginning of my hobby. After that incident, whenever I thought of that happy atmosphere, I would hide and read manga...which is why, even till this day, 「INNOCENT SMILE has a special place in my heart."

So that's why she was willing to take the risk to return this book to the library. Even Nobunaga had said that old editions of 「INNOCENT SMILE were priceless books. I think I finally understand why Nobunaga would do anything to achieve his goals.

"Phew...I'm finally done."

I heard the sound of the ENTER key being depressed. Looks like our mission was complete.

Nogizaka-san finally noticed my gaze. Just as she stretched in front of the computer screen, she suddenly stopped moving, like an electric toy dog that had run out of batteries.

"What's wrong? Is there something on my face?"

Nogizaka-san's face was beet-red due to her embarrassment, a reaction that I would never see in the classroom.

"No...I just think that you're a strange daughter of a wealthy and powerful family."

I told her my honest opinion.

"Hmm...I think it's really rude to say that to the person in question..."

Though she said that, Nogizaka-san didn't look angry at all. On the contrary, I thought she looked rather happy .

"In my opinion...Ayase-kun's much stranger than me. Yes, you're so strange that I can guarantee you'll win any All-Japan weirdo competition that there is."

"Thank you for the compliment."

What kind of competition is that!

"..."

"..."

For a moment, all was quiet.

"...Hahahaha!"

"...Hahahaha!"

In the next moment, both of us looked at each other and laughed. At the stroke of midnight, male and female laughter coming out of the empty library! If anyone hears that, there'll probably be a new version of the seven mysteries of the school. That'll be 'The terrifying maniacal laughter of a spirit couple in the library at midnight'.

I don't long how long we stood there laughing.

After our laughter had subsided, Nogizaka-san suddenly spoke rather seriously.

"I had thought.....that everything was over." She began to talk about such a thing abruptly.

"Everything was over?"

"Yes."

Nogizaka-san nodded her head furiously.

"At the time when Ayase-kun saw that I had borrowed 「INNOCENT SMILE, and also saw me trip and fall...I thought that everyone would know that I have this kind of hobby, and then everyone will look at me with strange looks and make fun of me. I really thought that it was going to turn out like that."

She's right. Although I didn't do it because I come into contact with such material on a regular basis through Nobunaga, there are many people in society who look down on people with such hobbies. If anyone knew that the 'Nuit Étoile' was an otaku, that person would probably announce it to the whole school without hesitation.

Wait a minute, Nogizaka-san's tone seems to be suggesting that...

"Nogizaka-san, did you think that I would go around telling everyone that you're an otaku?"

Could it be that she thinks I'm that kind of person?

Nogizaka-san looked away embarrassedly.

"I'm...I'm really sorry! Because I didn't know what kind of person you are! So I couldn't deny that there was a definite possibility of that happening. And I've almost never talked to guys before...So I was a little afraid...of you."

"Never talked to..."

Nogizaka-san? The 'Nuit Étoile'? Now I would have never known that!

"For some reason, guys are always extremely stiff around me, unable to relax like they do around other girls. It seems that only Ayase-kun's able to talk to me normally."

I think it's because Nogizaka-san's too cute and perfect . But...I don't have to be like the other guys!

Nogizaka-san continued,

"Which is why I really thought that everything was over, so much so that I even thought about running away to a faraway place...But the truth has proven that I was wrong, because Ayase-kun kept his promise and didn't tell anyone about my hobby, and even after knowing about my hobby, you didn't make fun of me. You treated me like a normal person....and even helped me. If not for you, I really won't know what I would have done...I think I'm really despicable to doubt you in the first place, I really want to shout out how much of an idiot I am. I really.....really want to thank you, Ayase-kun."

Nogizaka-san stood in front of me as she gave a curtsy to me to express her gratitude.

"Thank you.....Thank you so much for everything you've done!"

That posture was extremely similar to one I had seen in a certain magazine a few days ago, but now that Nogizaka-san was the one doing it, it was probably the cutest pose of the century...

Just as I was about to lose all sense of reason...

Shuffle, shuffle!

"!?"

A sound came from behind the shelves.

"What...what was that.....sound?"

Nogizaka-san grabbed me with lightning-quick reflexes. This kind of speed is the type that would only appear when one's caught in a fire...no, it should be an inhuman display of fleet-footedness, right? Whatever the reason as to Nogizaka-san's unnatural display of power, the point is, my arm came into contact with two soft orbs. ..

"It...It seems to have come from the other side of the shelves, could it be the 'dead book-reader'...

"Spirits don't exist in this world..."

They don't exist...Or rather, I hope they don't exist.

"What do we do?"

Nogizaka-san looked up at me anxiously. There are three courses of action available to me right now. One, under the influence of my considerable curiosity, I go over to check it out. Two, remain calm and run away. Three, pretend to be frightened and take advantage of the situation to hug Nogizaka-san. Personally, I hope to choose number three, but...No, it's merely my personal fantasy, and I could get charged for sexual harassment.

Logically, I should choose option two, since we've already done what we set out to do, there's no need to find out about anything that doesn't concern us.

"Ah, Ayase-kun..."

"I'll go and take a look, wait here for me."

She hugged me tightly around my waist.

"I'm going with you."

"But, you may see something scary..."

"I'll be even more afraid if I were to stay here by myself."

She's right.

"Then, let's go over together?"

"Al...Alright..."

The two of us started to walk towards the direction in which the strange sound had come from.

"I think...that sound came from the shelve with the music scores."

"Music scores?"

We even have music scores in our library? I only thought that it was weird they had 「INNOCENT SMILE , but it shouldn't be much of a surprise if they had music scores as well.

"It's around here."

Under the guidance of Nogizaka-san, just as we neared the corner of the shelf in question...

Dangdangdang.....

We heard a different sound from just now.

Shuffle shuffle...

And then we heard the sound of a book dropping onto the floor.

"Kya..."

Nogizaka-san grabbed my hand while covering her ears with surprising agility.

"I think..."

She looked up at me with tears in her eyes.

"It must be the 'dead book-reader'...Ayase-kun! I think we should run!"

"No, wait a moment..."

The sound of books dropping onto the floor stopped, but another sound took its place. Dingdangdangdingdangdang...It sounded familiar. Ah... could it be 'that'!

"Ah, Ayase-kun!"

I went up to the shelf and saw my conjecture validated .

"...It's a cellphone."

There was a white object on the shelf with the music scores, the white object was vibrating as it knocked into the music scores on the shelf. Because it's a cellphone that's receiving a call.

"...I seem to have seen this somewhere."

There was a keychain on it with YUKARI spelled out in English. Ah! Didn't that person say that she lost her cellphone? It looked as though she left it here when she came to borrow music scores. She really knows how to create a stir! I decided to return it to her tomorrow as I turned off the power to cut off its annoying ringtone.

"Nogizaka-san, it's alright, I've found the source of the sounds."

I called out to the ashen-faced, shivering Nogizaka-san who was hiding behind the shelf. Probably because the strange sounds had disappeared, Nogizaka-san seemed to have relaxed a little as she slowly made her way towards me.

"You know what was causing those sounds?"

"Yes, this is the source of it all"

I showed the white cellphone that had the opposite color to its owner's heart to Nogizaka-san, as she slumped down onto the ground as though her soul had just been sucked away.

"Ah, I feel weak now that I've loosened up ."

Nogizaka-san seemed to have been scared witless. This was the first time I've seen someone who's been scared to that extent, and that person was the 'Nuit Étoile'...It was a scene straight from the world of slapstick comedy.

"Hah..."

I couldn't help but laugh. Seeing that I was laughing at her, Nogizaka-san puffed out her cheeks.

"What...What are you laughing about! What's so funny ? It's not like I did it on purpose, it's because...because it was too terrifying!"

She was retaliating, but soon stopped.

"You're.....really a strange person."

"Same to you to!"

And then we looked at each other and started laughing again, laughing so loudly that even the people staying beside the school would probably be able to hear us.

Maybe a new version of the seven mysteries of the school would be heard in school tomorrow?

5

We finally completed our mission.

As we walked out of the school gate, Nogizaka-san bowed deeply to me.

"Thank you so much for today, Ayase-kun, you saved my life. Maybe...Today's actions weren't legal, but I was very happy."

It was fun. Yeah, that expression was pretty improper, but it wasn't without its merit. That's why I could respond with a large smile.

"You're welcome, I enjoyed myself too."

Those were my true feelings.

"You...can just call me Haruka."

Nogizaka-san requested timidly.

"I'm saying that, you can just call me by my name. It feels like I'm an outsider if you keep calling me

Nogizaka-san. No, I am an outsider, ah, I don't mean it that way...sob, I'm really bad at this...anyway, I wish that you'll call me Haruka and not Nogizaka-san."

She was serious about that.

Hmm...I don't know why she would be so flustered, but since she was the one who requested me to call her by her name, I don't think there should be any problems. To be honest, I felt that it would be an honor to be able to call her by her name.

"I got it, so I'll just call you...Haruka."

"Yes!"

Nogizaka-san nodded her head happily...No, I should refer to her as Haruka now. Right now, Haruka looked extremely cute.

"Then you should also call me Yuuto, all my good friends call me that."

For some reason, I suddenly felt embarrassed then and I purposely looked away from her.

"Good friends..."

Haruka mumbled before smiling again, an honest smile straight from the heart that I've never seen before in the classroom.

"I got it, Yuuto, please take care of me from now on."

And thus, the relationship between Nogizaka Haruka and I began.

Chapter 2

0

A certain scorching hot Sunday in May.

I stood in front of a certain store situated in the largest electronics street in Japan.

Looking at the strange sights in front of me, I couldn't help but sigh soundlessly.

"...Why isn't it out yet? I've been playing this for a long time..."

An extremely pretty girl muttered with a crestfallen look in her eyes as she leaned her petite head to one side.

This kind of expression wasn't particularly strange, since the pretty girl is still, in principle, human (although some people would think otherwise), and she seems to be frustrated with an unsolvable problem. In truth, it wasn't a very complex question, it's just that...

It's just that, the only problem lies between.....the object that the pretty girl held in her right hand, and the object in front of her eyes.

"This isn't the one again..."

Her slender fingers clutched a spherical object about 6cm in diameter, obtained from an exchange of coin currency. The object that had been rolling out of the machine incessantly since a while ago was what we commoners call a capsule vending machine.

"That's strange..."

Everytime she checked the toy in the egg-shaped capsule, Haruka's voice would become weaker, but even so, the hand that was constantly rotating the lever on the vending machine never stopped. Who would have guessed that her gambling instinct would be so strong.

"Next one...I'll surely get it on the next try..."

Anyway...This extremely pretty girl who was frantically throwing coins into a capsule vending machine as though her life depended on it gave people an overwhelming sense of discordance. Everyone who passed by the two of us would involuntarily look at the strange situation that we were in.

"Haruka...Isn't it enough already?"

She already had more than ten capsules rolling around on the ground beside her, but Haruka continued to shake her head.

"...Because the piano-playing Aki-chan isn't out yet..."

In other words, we'll be here forever if the piano-playing Aki-chan doesn't come out? God, don't be caught in the trap of despicable merchants.....

"..."

Clank clank, the lever sounded again. Haruka looked at the object within the capsule and frowned deeply as she gave a mournful expression.

"I didn't get it again..."

I didn't know what to do anymore as I helplessly watched Haruka continue to toss coin after coin into the machine, only to let out a sigh that's probably deeper than the Mariana Trench.

What...Just what am I doing!

I really don't understand myself. It's such a rare opportunity to go shopping with Haruka, so how did we end up here? Right now, I felt the overwhelming need to rethink the decision to take a new direction in life that I had made about a month ago.

How did I end up in this kind of situation?

I'll have to start...from three days ago.

1

After the Golden Week holidays had ended, everyone in school hurriedly began to prepare for the upcoming mid-term examinations. On a certain day, after school, I had been half-forced by the music teacher, who was also my assistant class teacher, to be her assistant (she made me clean the staff toilet all by myself). When I returned to the classroom, panting heavily from exertion, I found a letter in the drawer of my desk.

"If you have time after school, please come to the music room, I have something to discuss with you."

When did this letter get into my drawer? The handwriting on the letter was perfect, and I wouldn't be surprised if any other person would see this as a love letter or something similar.

"..."

There was only one unfortunate flaw in the letter. An animal with demonic eyes (its an animal right?) was drawn beside the line of words. If the person looking at

the drawing was an innocent child, he'll probably be completely heartbroken and his eyes opened to the cruelty of the world outside his sheltered environment.

I knew from first sight that only she could be the author of this letter. Or should I say, only I knew that she was capable of such satanic drawings.

"As I expected...Haruka."

Just as I expected, the signature at the bottom of the letter read 'Nogizaka Haruka'.

She's my classmate, the multi-talented daughter of a rich and powerful family, nicknamed the 'Nuit étoile' and the most famous person in the school with a three digit member count in her fan club. There may be some people in Hakujo Academy who doesn't know the name of their principal, but no one wouldn't know the name of Nogizaka Haruka.

Why would someone as famous as her, call someone as average as me to the music room after school? Because I knew a secret of hers...

Looking at the clock, I saw that it was going to be five o'clock in the afternoon, almost an hour and a half after

school had ended. Even though I couldn't have possibly avoided the assignment that had been forced onto me, the princess would probably have gone home already after waiting in vain for such a long time.

I ran towards the music room. There was no one in the corridor that was illuminated by the setting sun, and the only sounds that could be heard were from the sports clubs that were practicing outside the windows of the corridor.

Though it was only May, the weather was already extremely warm, so warm that even a short run during the evening hours would have one work up a sweat. I took out a towel from my bag to wipe my sweat, deciding that I would buy a can of Mango juice (Summer Limited-edition product) from the vending machine. Phew, it's really hot.

When I reached the door of the music room, I could hear the sounds of people talking alongside the music from the piano; looks like there are a few people in the music room. Don't tell me that there're other besides Haruka in the room?

I pushed open the thick, acoustic door. On the other side of the door laid... the forbidden garden.

The first person I saw was Haruka. That's alright, since she was the one who called me over. I would be in trouble if I hadn't seen her.

But...Why were there so many girls around Haruka?

These girls had completely surrounded Haruka, who was playing the piano. At first glance, there were more than ten girls from all levels, from the first year kouhais to the third year senpais. Maybe these people were jealous of the 'Nuit étoile's' popularity?

...That's impossible, Haruka shouldn't be the subject of anyone's jealousy. From the expressions on the girls' faces as they watched Haruka's slender fingers fly across the keyboard, they should be full of admiration for her.

Which leaves me with only one answer; Nogizaka Haruka, the 'Nuit étoile', was just as popular with girls as she was with guys. In other words, in the eyes of her fellow girls, Haruka was in an extremely influential position. Such that even playing the piano in the music room after school would draw a crowd.

At the end of a piece, all the girls applauded enthusiastically.

"Haruka-senpai, that was a really good piece, what's the name of that piece?"

"That was <<Jeux d'eau>> (playing water), by the French composer Maurice Ravel."

"Wow, you could really feel the ripples in the water! I was completely enthralled."

"It really did give the impression of a smooth flowing stream."

The girls excitedly discussed their own opinions on the piece.

Hmm...So this is the world of girls! A field of lilies made up the background of this world, urging one to move forward. Right now, those girls were busy fawning over Haruka, while Haruka was busy answering their questions, so no one actually noticed that I had walked into the music room... Which made me feel left out and unimportant.

I had no choice but to announce my presence in the room.

"Hey, Haruka!"

I waved at her from a corner of the music room. As expected... my words completely changed the atmosphere in the room, although I didn't really want to do something like that.

"...Who is he?"

"He just called Haruka-senpai by her name, what's their relationship?"

"He's Ayase from class one..."

More than ten murderous looks shot towards me at the same time. D...Did I do something wrong?

I broke out in cold sweat as I involuntarily took a step backwards. At this moment, Haruka finally noticed my presence as she smiled at me.

"Ah, Yuuto-san, you're here, sorry to keep you waiting ."

"Haruka-senpai called him by his name..."

"Haruka-senpai looks really happy..."

"Who does he think he is to do something like this!"

The piercing looks from the girls became even sharper, and I felt as though I was kneeling on the carpet of needles in the <<Legend of King Arthur>> with a huge stone mat in my lap.

"I'm very sorry, but I have a meeting with this person. We'll stop here for today..."

Haruka bowed her head in apology as the girls objected with cries of 'No!', 'We still want to hear senpai play the piano'. Even so, they still left the music room, not daring to oppose Haruka's decision.

As they passed by me, some of them glared at me murderously, while others threatened me with a variety of death threats ranging from 'If you dare to do anything strange to Haruka-senpai, I'll stab you!', to 'Watch your back when you're walking alone at night!' and to extreme ones like 'Be careful of an errant tub of acid!'.

"...What did you want to talk to me about?"

After I had confirmed that those girls (Murderous spirits) had indeed left the room (It would be dangerous not to do so), I went into the topic that I had gone to the music room for.

Haruka lowered her head as she shyly asked,

"Yuuto-san...Are you free on Sunday?"

"Sunday? I don't have anything planned for that day."

Though I was wondering why Haruka would ask something like this, obviously I couldn't tell her that I had to wash the laundry for my idiot sister on Sundays (mostly household chores). Meanwhile, Haruka gave a happy expression after hearing my answer before apprehensively asking me another question ...

"Th...Then, could you go out with me?"

"..."

In that moment, my brain was completely blank as I desperately tried to process the meaning behind Haruka's words.

Gah...

This sudden event had really caused my brain to devolve. Could this be...

"A date?"

Did Haruka just ask me out on a date?

"No no no, it's not that, it's not a date..."

Haruka shook her head vigorously as her face was as red as a cooked shrimp. Looking at how Haruka frantically denied that it was a date...I felt a stab of disappointment.

"It's not a date, just that I wanted to buy something and I wanted you to go with me."

A red-faced Haruka explained. So that's what it's about. While we've been on extremely good terms this past month, the 'Nuit étoile' would never ask me out on a

date. But then...from another perspective, wouldn't normal people see something like this (two people going shopping together) as a date?

"So...So what do you think? Of...Of course, if you're not interested, you don't have to force yourself..."

"No, it's alright, I'll go."

My answer was faster than the speed of light.

Anyone who dared to reject Haruka's invitation would surely be eaten by demons.

"Really?"

Haruka suddenly beamed.

"Th...thank you. Because it's my first time going there, I'd feel insecure by myself... I was thinking of what to do if Yuuto-san turned me down."

Hmm, for some reason I would accept with excessive pleasure. You might say I was extremely happy.

"By shopping, do you mean...?"

When I asked such a fundamental thing, she answered with a beautiful smile to the extend that 100% of the highschool boys in the street would fall in love with the ' Nuit étoile'.

"Yes. Akihabara"

Well in a word... I got it now. This is the secret of Nogizaka Haruka. A strange string that ties her and me, a surprising side of the 'Nuit étoile' that I'm the only one to know.

So.

What can I say... Nogizaka Haruka... is an otaku.

2

And that was how I decided the way I was to spend my Sunday.

To be honest, I wasn't particularly excited.

Of course, it's not that I didn't want to spend Sunday together with Haruka. I should be barking with excitement at Haruka's invitation, since it was a Sunday that I would be spending with the 'Nuit étoile' alone, something that was way better than washing clothes at home. And, Haruka's very cute, so I should be as happy as a mouse when I'm with her.

The reason for my lack of enthusiasm was because I only have bad memories of Akihabara.

That day was the third time in my entire life that I've been to Akihabara. The previous two experiences were painful, to say the least...of course, it wasn't Akihabara's fault, but the fault of the idiot who dragged me to Akihabara. But the deep mental scars that I had from my first two trips to Akihabara would not disappear so easily.

I first came to this place when I was in first grade.

At that time, I had accepted Nobunaga's invitation, leaving the familiar surroundings of my house to this huge street with an adventurous mindset. But in merely just an hour later, I had already regretted accepting his invitation.

Because I got lost.

I was alone on the crowded and chaotic street.

The reason was simple, the fellow who had brought me here forgot about my existence the moment he ran off to buy the things that he wanted. He was the same age as me, but nonetheless Akihabara was already his second home, unlike me, who was unable to differentiate North, South, East, and West the moment I walked into the place (though this happens frequently to me), which was why it didn't take long for me to get lost.

After getting lost, I obviously was unable to find my way to the train station.

After two long hours, the crying and wailing me finally received the protection of the police.

The second time was a few years later, when I was in my senior year at my primary school.

Even though I had already swore never to come to Akihabara ever again, I once again accepted that his invitation. This time, that fellow ran off again when we were shopping, leaving me behind. It's been an extremely dark part of my life until now, despite managing to get home by myself this time.

And that is why I view this street with a slightly fearful and suspicious look.

We had agreed to meet in front of the Akihabara train station. Because it was a Sunday, the station was flooded with people. Oh right, Haruka had said that it was her first time coming to Akihabara. I was surprised when I first heard that, but upon closer inspection, it actually wasn't anything to be surprised about. I had already come to know that Haruka was a clever, beautiful, kind-hearted and talented daughter of a rich and powerful family in our one month's worth of interaction. Which means that as an Otaku, she wasn't very experienced, but I could see that her potential was probably higher than Mount Everest.

Just as I was lost in my own thoughts...

"...Have you been waiting for long?"

Speak of the devil. In the time that I was embroiled in my own thoughts, Haruka had already arrived.

"I'm sorry, I had wanted to be on time..."

"No, you're not late, I was early."

I was speaking the truth. To be precise, as I was so looking forward to spending the day with Haruka that I woke up extremely early. That kind of excited feeling was like that of a primary school kid before going on a field trip. Because it was so embarrassing, I didn't dare to mention it to Haruka.

But even then!!!

"...Mm..."

Today was the first time I've seen Haruka in casual clothing...How should I describe her? She's really extremely cute. A white ribbon was tied around her silky long hair, coupled with a white one-piece western dress and a cream cardigan, she really looked like the daughter

of a rich and powerful family. This combination served to amplify her charm by a full 2.5 times in comparison with any other daughter of a rich and powerful family (My personal subjective opinion). Every inch of her being simply oozed class.....Ah! I was already at a loss for words, so in short, she was so cute that she had the power to attract the entire galaxy.

"What...What's wrong? I'll be embarrassed if you continue to stare at me like this..."

"Ah, I'm sorry."

I couldn't help but stare at her dazedly. But the way Haruka raised the edges of her eyes and looked at me while blushing was so cute...

No, I can't continue to fantasize! I'm worried that something will happen to my brain if I continue in this vein.

I shook my head vigorously, throwing all my prior thoughts out of the window. Haruka, on the other hand, looked at me apprehensively.

"...Is there something wrong with me? It's my first time wearing this dress...Is it ugly?"

"No, of course not."

Of course there wasn't anything wrong with her, the dress suited Haruka perfectly.

Haruka may not have realized, but since her appearance, all eyes (especially the male ones) had been trained on her. In all honesty, no matter where Haruka went, she'll always be the focal point in a crowd. She has always stood out, like the beautiful swan that flies into a crowd of ugly ducklings (myself included).

"Let's go!"

"Ah, yes."

Upon hearing my suggestion, Haruka smiled shyly as her dress fluttered slightly in the wind. That simple action made everyone around her sigh in amazement, because it was.....really really really really really really cute.

I'm so lucky to be able to see her like this! I shouted out in my mind before walking off with Haruka.

I think I'll explain the reason behind our shopping trip to Akihabara.

No, I mean, of course we're here to buy something. I just wanted to describe in more detail what exactly we were here for.

Below is the contents of a conversation I had with Haruka.

"Well...I want to buy a silver Portable Toys Advance."

The 'Portable Toys Advance' that Haruka is talking about is an extremely popular handheld gaming console, commonly referred to as the 'PTA'. To my knowledge, the silver PTA should be an extremely rare limited edition model, something that even Nobunaga wants to get his hands on.

"Then we should go to the toy shop shouldn't we?"

"Right, I think that any toy shop or electronics store should have it. I'm not very sure either, I'm just following what's stated on the magazine."

She's not very trustworthy is she...

"Then let's go check out the electronics stores, since every store on this street is an electronics store..."

To be honest, it'll be harder to find a store on this street that isn't an electronics store.

"Then let's start from the electronics store on that corner alright?"

I attempted to steer us in the right direction.

"Ah, wait a moment."

My suggestion was rejected.

"Hmm...actually, I've specially prepared something for today."

Haruka fumbled in her bag for a while before taking out two pieces of paper.

"Hmm...Yuuto-san, this is your copy, I hope it'll be useful..."

"...What's this?"

"A shopping guide."

Haruka smiled proudly.

"Huh..."

What in the world is this?

"This is a guide that I specially created for today. I've already organized the places that we're going to, the path we're going to take, and our estimated time of arrival on this piece of paper, so it's a universal map. I spent three hours making this guide, hee hee."

Haruka laughed conservatively.

So it's actually a map. It's a good idea to plan out our schedule ahead of time, but after looking at the strange lines that bear a strong resemblance to two snakes entangled in a fight, I don't think any one would think that it's a map, right?

I didn't let my uneasiness show as I raised the guide up for a better look. Although I had already lost hope in the map part of the guide, the other parts seemed to have been done well, so we shouldn't get lost with the information written here. There shouldn't be any

problem as long as we're able to reach our destinations without any trouble.

According to the schedule on the guide, Haruka had placed the buying of the PTA (estimated to be around 5 O'clock in the afternoon) as the last activity of the day.

"Why did you put the most important thing at the last place on the schedule? If you really want to buy it, shouldn't you get it earlier..."

I thought that the average Japanese citizen would want to get their hands on their target object as soon as possible. Perhaps Haruka had other intentions when she placed this as the last activity on the schedule, maybe she's saving the best for last?

In response to my question, Haruka squinted playfully at me.

"If we buy it at the beginning of the day, it would mean that our shopping trip has ended. Though it's something that I'm looking forward to... it'll be such a waste to just let it end so quickly. And also..."

"And also?"

"And also...I think that the most important activity should be saved till the end of the day."

Looks like Haruka is the type of person who would eat her favorite food last.

Anyway, the purchase of the PTA should be the main objective of the day.

But before the completion of the main objective, it seems like we have a few side objectives to complete first . So the two of us followed the schedule as we began shopping in Akihabara.

This place...is still as crowded as ever.

No matter where one turned to, one would always see posters of anime and video games, even some life-sized advertisements. To be here was like stepping into another dimension, giving one the feeling of being in a completely different world.

"Hmm...We'll turn left at this junction, walk forward for a bit, then turn right..."

Haruka looked at the map as she guided me through this strange new world.

...How does she read this map? To me, the map, looked more and more like eels with stomaches that were entangled with each other and a certain kind of talent seemed to be needed to be able to draw such a map. However in comparison, an even larger amount of talent was required to be able to decipher this map...Although, I would never want to have that kind of talent.

"And then after turning right here, we should see a white building."

Thanks to Haruka, we didn't get lost and got to each of our destinations safely, swiftly completing all our side objectives (shopping at anime stores, buying otaku merchandise etc). Right now, we're moving towards out fourth objective - an anime bookstore.

As we walked across the large road, we saw many small groups of people. There were even thirty, forty people forming a queue outside some shops. Maybe

those people were participating in some event? On such a hot day, they really do have it hard. I would be happy to help them stand in for a while. But, obviously that isn't possible.

Just as I was looking at those people,

"Ah! That's!"

Haruka, who was standing beside me, suddenly ran off. Ah, not again! Her target was yet another store, and I could only quietly observe her excited figure.

This was already the third time this had happened today, so I wasn't surprised anymore.

I slowly walked towards where Haruka was headed.

Haruka had plastered her entire body onto the display window of that shop.

"So cute..."

Her gaze was fixated on a model of a red-haired girl playing the piano (the price was extremely expensive, at

twenty-five thousand yen.....). The look in her eyes was exactly the same as the youth who goes to the music store everyday to look at his favorite trumpet.

Haruka would rush over like a bull charging towards a red flag whenever she saw anything that she liked, not caring about anything else that was happening around her. Even the me that's beside her would be completely forgotten.

Which is why for a few times already, I had been thrown into an uncomfortable situation whereby I was holding a handful of goods but abandoned by my shopping partner, which made me feel rather lonely and empty.

Why am I here? I began to question the validity of my existence in this place...But, I came to terms with this feeling of emptiness as time wore on.

"Wouldn't it be a form of happiness if one was able to see something as cute as this?"

However, being abandoned by Haruka didn't seem such a big deal after seeing how happy she was,

something which I would definitely not have seen in school. Because being able to look at such an innocent and happy 'Nuit étoile' was the best form of payment.

After fifteen minutes, Haruka still didn't look as though she was going to peel herself off the display window.

"Umm...If you like it so much, why don't you just buy it!"

If this goes on, we'll be disrupting the store's ability to conduct business. But when I suggested this to her, Haruka answered with a gloomy expression on her face,

"There are too many things that I want to buy, but...I don't have the budget for it."

"Budget?"

Who'd have thought that the daughter of a family that's as rich as royalty would say something like that. Judging by their standard of living, Haruka's pocket money should be at least a million yen a month, and her new year's gift money should be at least five million yen right?

When I asked,

"N...not at all!"

Haruka shook her head violently in denial.

"My pocket money's really little...I have a hard time just trying to save up a bit of money every month."

"Just how much do you get a month?"

I wanted to know more, just for reference.

"Well..."

The amount that came out of Haruka's mouth was surprisingly similar to the amount of my pocket money.

"That's really surprising..."

I was really extremely surprised. The eldest daughter of the rich and powerful Nogizaka clan receiving exactly the same amount of pocket money a month as the son of the middle Ayase clan, that probably won't even be able to trace their family tree up to more than a few generations, would probably surprise anyone.

"My father's extremely strict...For today, I even took out my precious ten-thousand yen bill from my saving box...even my pig-san was called to be with the Lord."

Pig-san...Is she referring to her piggy bank?

"That's why I can't spend my money rashly...It's alright , I'll be happy just by looking."

Haruka laughed happily. She really attracts the affection of others, just for that (before the store assistants come out to chase us away), Haruka, Uncle promises to let you stare at the display for as long as you want!

And then, we stayed for about ten more minutes in front of the store display.

"Thank you for allowing me to have such a blissful experience."

Haruka was finally satisfied. But, just as we prepared to set out towards our next destination...

"Ah!"

Haruka seemed to have noticed something once again, as she rushed towards the side of the main road for the fourth time.

This time, her target was a shop selling anime merchandise. However, she didn't step into the store, but made a beeline for a block of squarish objects that were out in front. Ah! Isn't that the vending machines that sell what we call capsules! How nostalgic, I remember frequenting such machines during my primary school days. The capsules contained plastic figurines of the gundams and certain muscle-bound superheroes which I loved, and if I were to go through my old stuff, I'd probably turn up quite a sizable amount of those figurines.

"This should be what you're talking about right? A capsule will roll out if you put a coin in...Ah! Isn't that ' Clumsy Girl Aki-chan'?"

...I seemed to have heard that name somewhere. The rectangular box that Haruka was pointing her finger at had a picture of the figurine of a familiar-looking blue-haired girl on a piano.

"That's...really cute."

Haruka had a childish look in her eyes. I felt like I was becoming more and more familiar with Haruka's interests.

"Why don't you try it?"

This was different from what she was looking at just now, so it shouldn't be much of a problem.

"Hmm? Try it? You're saying that I should try this machine?"

"That's right."

"Hmm...But..."

I encouraged her to try the machine, but for some unknown reason, Haruka was extremely hesitant about my suggestion. Ah! Could it be that she wasn't interested in these things?

In response to my question, Haruka answered in a tiny voice.

"Umm...To tell the truth, it's my first time trying something like this."

"Your first time?"

Her first time using a capsule vending machine?

"Yes."

Haruka nodded abashedly.

"Today's the first time I've ever seen something like this, and it's also my first contact with it. Hmm...How should I put it...This should be my first experience right? That's why I'm a bit worried...would I be able to do it?"

"..."

The word is probably correct. However I'd like you to stop speaking of your first experience in the middle of the afternoon in the presence of others.

"W...what do you think?"

"Hmm... you're probably right. It's not something particularly difficult."

Just put the coin in and turn the handle for the capsule to roll out. Even kindergarten kids can do it.

"Is that so? Then I guess I'll give it a try."

Haruka seems to have finally made up her mind. She took out her purse from her bag and approached the machine with an extremely serious expression reminiscent of a middle-aged technologically-challenged employee's expression towards the company computer on his desk. Looks like I'll have to gently watch over her for the time being...

"A...ah? Ah? It's strange... what's happening?"

Suddenly, I saw that Haruka had a confused look on her face.

"What's wrong?"

"Yuuto-san...Is this machine broken? I can't put the money in."

"It shouldn't be broken...Let me have a look."

I leaned over for a closer look.

"..."

Only when I leaned over did I see that Haruka was attempting to stuff a ten-thousand yen bill into the coin opening. My clever Haruka-sama, if it's a paper note, you'll never be able to stuff it into an opening designed for coins.

"??"

"...Haruka, you can't use notes for capsule machines, they only accept coins."

"Ah? Seriously?"

"...Yes."

I beg you, please don't ask such questions with a perfectly straight face.

"I get it, it only accepts coins."

Haruka opened her purse once more, only to give an upset expression, as though she was unable to eat a delicious dish that's right in front of her.

"...I don't have coins."

"...I'll lend you some!"

If this goes on, god knows when Haruka will finally start turning the handle of the capsule machine, so I made that suggestion.

"...I'm sorry to bother you."

I placed a thousand-yen bill into the coin exchange machine in return for ten hundred-yen coins. Looking at the transmutation of my paper note into coins, I felt as though I had lost money, since after all, I'm just your average stingy city-dweller.

"Here, take it."

"Th...Thank you."

Haruka nervously took a hundred-yen coin from my hand.

And that was how Haruka began her first experience with capsule vending machines...Even though...I personally felt that this first experience was rather dangerous.

I was worried about whether she would become addicted to the machine.

From past experience, I know that for anyone using the capsule vending machines, it's extremely hard to stop once one has chosen a target. Unless the target object has been obtained, the person using the machine would usually not be able to bring him/herself to stop.

If that person is a primary school kid, then it isn't that bad, because no matter how much he/she wants to continue playing, he/she has to stop once his/her money is used up. In other words the wallets of primary school children are natural deterrents. If at that exact moment, the person next to that particular primary school kid coincidentally gets the figurine that he/she wants, that kid will surely burst into tears on the spot. But, after going through countless such trials and tribulations, that primary school kid will eventually mature and grow up... Wait, I seem to have gone off topic here.

Anyway, what I want to say is that, if the person playing is a high school student with a significantly bigger wallet, what would the situation be like?

Just thinking about the probable outcome gave me a headache.

Though I fervently hoped that my predicted answer was wrong, the truth has no pity...

As I expected, in order to obtain her target object (The piano-playing 'Clumsy girl Aki-chan'), Haruka sent four pieces of Natsume Soseki(1000 Yen) up into heaven, while the emptied capsules rolled around on the ground beside us like pebbles on the riverbank.

3

And then it was lunchtime.

According to the schedule, the place where we're supposed to have lunch is a restaurant named ' Calotte-culotte'.

"What kind of restaurant is it?"

It could be a family restaurant, but it was impossible to tell from the name of the restaurant.

Haruka gave a mysterious smile, looking as though she had been waiting for that question for a long time.

"It's a cafe that I read about in a magazine, a place which I've been wanting to go for a long time. This is the second-most important activity of the day, so please look forward to it!"

The second-most important activity of the day? Hmm, upon closer inspection, there's a small flower-shaped symbol beside the name of the cafe, something which I had missed (or had subconsciously deleted from my field of vision). And also, a 'monster' was drawn beside the large electronics store that was the focal point of our

shopping trip. This 'monster' had a needle-like beard, sharp claws and blood-red eyes...Haruka was probably trying to draw a cat wasn't she?

"Lalala...♪"

Haruka hummed the tune of 'A Young Maiden's Prayer' as she skipped along.

But I was unable to relax. My body was ensnared by an unknown sense of uneasiness, like the sudden appearance of rain clouds, together with thunder and lightning on an impossibly sunny day.

"We're here."

Haruka's voice brought me down to earth. Looks like we have already reached our destination while I was lost in thought.

"Looks like there aren't a lot of people inside yet, that's great! Yuuto-san, let's go inside!"

Haruka's voice sounded extremely joyful.

Just what kind of weird (please forgive my rudeness) cafe has Haruka recommended? I looked up while holding on to my biased opinion.

"...Huh?"

It's a very normal-looking cafe!

The exterior of the cafe gave passerbys a cute yet elegant impression, the type which girls like. Looking in through the glass windows, the interior decorations also weren't too flashy, giving potential customers a good feeling about the cafe. After going into the cafe itself, I didn't find anything that was particularly abnormal or unacceptable. Anyway, the interior decorations of this restaurant had white as it's basic theme, giving the cafe a simplistic feel. Although I was a bit concerned about the fact that most of the customers were male, since everything was within my area of tolerance, I didn't give much thought to it.

We sat down at a table beside the window and looked at the menu. The menu had...many imaginative dishes, but...it's still rather normal I guess!

Hmm...Looks like I've been worrying for nothing. Haruka should have placed this cafe as the second most important activity due to its cute decor. Yes, that must be it, in principle, Haruka's still a normal girl.

Just as I sighed in relief and prepared to order, a girl's voice sounded above my head.

"Welcome, would you be ordering now?"

Ah! The waitress was here to take out orders. I was still trying to decide between 'Pasta from the unbelievable kingdom', or the 'Seven dwarves' apple pie', while Haruka was also having a hard time deciding on what to order. Well then, I'll just have to ask the waitress to wait for a while more!

I put down the menu and raised my head.

"Hmm, I'm sorry, but we'll need a bit more time to decide, please..."

I was unable to finish the sentence.

Because what I saw made all my bodily functions come to a complete stop.

Even my brain stopped working.

"..."

"Mister, what's wrong?"

Because standing in front of my eyes was a...how should I put it...a maid. She was wearing an apron with a similarly colored hairband (something like a hairband, I don't know the official name for it), and she also had something that looked like cat ears on her head. Was I hallucinating?

"Your friend hasn't decided on her order yet?"

"Ah, that's right. Could you please wait for a while more?'

"I got it~~Please take your time."

The plate-bearing cat-eared maid nodded. A cat-ear maid...If I were to describe her appearance, I would say that her performance is extremely outstanding.

"Then please call for me when both of you have decided..."

The cat-ear maid smiled kindly as she walked away, her tail swaying from side to side behind her. To confirm that my vision was still normal, I immediately shot a question at Haruka.

"Haruka...what is this place?"

"Isn't this a cafe?"

That I know... I mean, when did cat-eared maids become the standard accessories of a Japanese cafe?

"The uniforms of the waitresses here are all very cute, that's why everyone comes here just for the maids."

"..."

...Hang on, Haruka said 'everyone'?

I rushed out of the cafe to check out its sign once again , realizing that the sign really did say 'Maid cafe' ' Calotte-culotte'.

So that's it...It really is that kind of cafe.

I sat back down feeling emotionally drained.

A maid cafe! Since the truth was now in front of my eyes, I could only agree with the cafe's decision to let their waitresses dress up as maids, since that was their main selling point. There would be no point in running a maid cafe without maids in it.

Which was why I could only compromise. No, not that I wasn't disturbed, but if I was too disturbed, we won't be able to eat lunch. But...

"...Hey, why are all of them wearing cat ears?"

That was my biggest question. And upon closer inspection, some of the maids even had tails...From a purely academic point of view, what are they trying to do with that kind of accessory?

"Isn't it because it's very cute?"

Haruka's answer was short and sweet.

"The original maid costume is already extremely cute, so adding a pair of cat ears would serve to amplify that cuteness. This is a perfect example of a situation whereby 1 plus 1 does not equate to 2, but equates to 3, or even 4."

Haruka smiled. I agree with her analysis, but...

"It's really cute...I want to try on a maid costume too. I think I'll borrow one from Hazuki next time..."

Haruka looked at the maids with a dreamy look in her eyes. Hmm...I want to imagine...how Haruka would look like in a maid uniform. Haruka in a maid costume and wearing a pair of cat ears, smiling as she says 'Master♪'... it has a nice feel to it.

...What am I thinking about!

I don't like the me that's thinking unwholesome thoughts. To purge those impure thoughts from my brain , I twisted my body and looked at Haruka, who was still looking dreamily at the maids in the cafe out of the corner of my eye. Suddenly, Haruka lightly hit the palm of her left hand with her right hand as though she suddenly remembered something.

"Yuuto-san...I thought of a good idea."

"...What good idea?"

I don't think that it'll be anything good for me, which was why I was rather afraid of Haruka's answer.

"I want to ask them to allow us to take pictures of them ."

"Huh?"

"It's such a rare chance for me to be here, so I want to take a photo with the maids ."

"Wait minute..."

I wasn't even able to try to stop her before Haruka started moving with a digital camera that had popped out of nowhere in her hand.

"Excuse me, but...could I take a picture with you?"

Haruka called a maid over and made her request.

"I'm very sorry, but our cafe prohibits the taking of pictures..."

The cat-eared maid rejected the request politely.

"Hmm? Is that so?"

"Yes, I'm really sorry..."

The maid bowed apologetically. That's great, though I felt that it wasn't very nice to Haruka, but at least I won't be forced to take an embarrassing picture in this kind of cafe.

But, I seemed to have relaxed a tad too early.

"Really...can't? I really really wanted to take a picture with cat-ear maids..."

Haruka looked like an abandoned kitten. Perhaps the cat-ear maid couldn't bear to see a customer in such a depressed state, she thought about it for a while before telling Haruka, 'Hmm, please wait for a while, perhaps there's a way,' and then ran off towards the employee area of the cafe. I fervently hoped that she wouldn't come back with a solution...but before I could do anything, the cat-eared maid came running back.

"Mister, Miss, please follow me."

"?"

"About this, I told the manager about your request, and he allows you to take pictures. If you don't mind, I

could take the picture with the two of you. But so as to not disturb the other customers, we'll have to go into the employee section of the cafe to take the pictures..."

"Really? Of course that would be alright. Thank you."

Haruka nodded in appreciation as she smiled joyfully, causing the cat-ear maid to blush in embarrassment. How should I put it, because Haruka used her angelic smile (ultimate move), that was effective against both genders. Hmm...perhaps there would be one more female member for the fan club, which doesn't have many female members. (By the way, the male:female ratio of the Hakujo Academy Nogizaka Haruka Fanclub is 5:1).

Anyway, on that day, the 'Nuit étoile', the cat-eared maid and I smiled for the camera (my face was cramped up), obtaining a photo that could be passed down to later generations, but was too embarrassing to talk about.

Under the smiling face of the cat-ear maid, I left the maid cafe feeling extremely tired. But almost

immediately, Haruka saw something that she liked once again, swiftly going into her fifth special operation of the day. I could only sit down on the dirty bench in front of the store, staring blankly at Haruka.

"Ah! Isn't that Yuuto?"

A voice that shouldn't be heard here came from the crowd.

I pretended not to know this person as I turned away. But this fellow was extremely stubborn and never gave up easily.

"Hey, Yuuto..."

"..."

"Yuuto?"

"..."

"Ah, you're ignoring me on purpose! Alright, you have a strategy, I have one too."

"..."

"Hmm...watch out! Ayase Yuuto, Hakujo Academy Year 1 Class 2, during his kindergarten years, had once been....."

"...I get it, I get it, Nobunaga, it's my fault."

Seeing that I surrendered, this childhood friend of mine said childishly, 'That's more like it.'

"But...Nobunaga, what are you doing here?"

"Huh? You just asked a very strange question. As long as it's not a school day, I'll always be here. You of all people should know that this is our sacred land."

"...Right, now that you mention it."

...I guess I do.

"It just so happens that there's an event today! No, to be precise, it started from yesterday...The more surprising thing should be your presence here. You always reject my invitations to come here!"

I don't want to come precisely because you're the one inviting me. To me, the combination of this person and this street was the worst copulation on earth. Particularly

during New Years and festival times, it feels like everyone on this street is attending a funeral or something.

This fellow was right, it wasn't surprising at all for him to be here, for it was like seeing fish in the ocean, a natural phenomenon. For where else would Otaku be if not here at Akihabara?

The problem was, I had completely forgotten about shopping with Haruka. Ah, now that I've remembered the reason behind my presence on this street, I have to think of a solution to this situation.

"What's wrong? Yuuto, you don't look well."

"I have a slight headache..."

"That's bad, do you want me to give you a pill for it? Half of the contents of this pill is my kindness."

How could he say something like that to a person with a headache!

"Never mind, Nobunaga, aren't you busy? You don't have to care about me, just go!"

"I'm not busy. The main event has already ended, so I'm free."

"But isn't being together with me really boring? On such a rare Sunday, you should spread out your wings and fly!"

"Yuuto, why do I get the feeling that you're trying to brush me off."

"No, why would I do that..."

The situation was really bad. I have to make this fellow disappear before Haruka comes back or things will get ugly.

"Hmm...Whatever makes you happy! Since my event has finished and I'm so tired, I think I should just go home and sleep."

A sleepy-looking Nobunaga gave a loud yawn, a rare action for someone as healthy as him.

"Because the event started yesterday, I've practically been awake since yesterday. Luckily everything went smoothly at the stall. Hahaha,"

Looks like this guy is really tired.

"Then I'll be going first. Yuuto, see you in school tomorrow!"

Nobunaga waved the paper bag in his right hand as he walked towards the station.

4

After spending a period of time with Nobunaga.

The main activity of today (in Haruka's opinion) was finally going to be completed, as the scheduled time to buy the PTA drew nearer.

"It's now four forty-eight in the afternoon...It's time for the main activity of the day!"

I followed behind Haruka as we made our way towards our final destination. Because we had completed all our previous objectives successfully, Haruka was in an extremely good mood. Right now, I had two paper bags in my hands, filled to the brim with the spoils of war (all Haruka's), other than the mountain of free coupons, posters and catalogues, there were also manga (the newest issue of <<INNOCENT SMILE>> etc) and a few light novels. Though there weren't a lot of them, due to the fact that all of them were paper products, the two paper bags were extremely heavy.

"Yuuto-san...Are you alright? Maybe I should take one bag."

"No, it's alright, I'm fine."

Her concern came as a relief, but if not to carry things, I don't know what I'm here for today.

"But..."

"I'm really fine, I'm used to such heavy loads."

Ever since I started primary school, Ruko and Yukari would hire me to carry things for them at a cost of 50 yen per hour (I was forced to take the job).

Especially when it was summer, where I would be panting like crazy in the hot weather while the two of them happily ate ice-cream beside me...Now that I think of it, shouldn't that be classified as child abuse?

Thinking of how I was abused in the past, I naturally felt a tad depressed, while Haruka looked at me worriedly.

"You don't look so good...Umm...Is...Is it because the bags are too heavy?"

"No...I just remembered my cruel past."

"Cruel?"

"That's not an expression for something else."

"?"

A question mark appeared above Haruka's head.

"Ah, it's nothing, let's not talk about me anymore. We should move on! It won't be good if the PTA's sold out."

I mustered all of my strength to lift the bags higher and walked on ahead of Haruka.

"Yuuto-san."

I was immediately halted by Haruka.

"Shouldn't it be that way?"

"..."

Speaking of which, I don't know where the store is.

"It's this way."

"...Right."

I nodded and followed behind Haruka.

My words actually came through.

Even though I had said it on a whim, I had never expected it to come true.

"...Sold out?"

"Yes, I'm really sorry..."

The bespectacled shop assistant bowed deeply in apology.

Right now, we were in the video game section on the third floor of the large electronics store. The two of us, who managed to reach the store by the scheduled time, only saw the 'out of stock' sign that had been pasted onto the box that had formerly stocked the limited edition silver PTAs.

"The limited edition silver PTAs are extremely popular , such that 70% of our stock were pre-ordered, while the remaining 30% were sold out before lunch."

The shop assistant also told us that the situation in the store today was extremely chaotic, such that if the

customers didn't start queuing up yesterday, they wouldn't have been able to get their hands on the limited edition silver PTA.

"So there aren't any ways to get it?"

"All the other chain stores are also out of stock, so even if you were to go to any of our chain stores, you probably won't be able to buy it..."

The shop assistant answered my question seriously. He looked like those giant apes that live in the mountains , but he was probably a nice guy.

All in all, the result was clear.

"We were too naive..."

If we had really wanted the limited edition silver PTA, we should have had been prepared to have started queuing way before the store's opening time. To saunter into the store at 5 in the afternoon was really a grossly uninformed decision.

"..."

I looked to my side at Haruka, who stood there like a statue, her eyes devoid of all light.

"Ah, Haruka."

Though Haruka was usually perfect, and occasionally clumsy, looking at this blank expression of hers, I didn't know what to say to her.

"It's alright, we were just unlucky."

"..."

"Haruka?"

"...Huh? Ah?"

Haruka finally came back to reality, but she had a dead look in her eyes...looks like she suffered a deep psychological wound.

"Let's just leave this place first, since we can't do anything about it."

I wanted to prevent the atmosphere from becoming too awkward.

"...Al...Alright."

After answering lifelessly, Haruka walked towards the elevator. But her body started to sway unsteadily halfway to the elevator.

"Haruka?"

"Hmm? What?"

Just as she answered me, Haruka's body suddenly fell forward.

"!"

The second before Haruka slammed into the ground, I managed to catch her. Wow! Her waist is so thin, and she smells so nice...No, now's not the time to think about such things,

"Haruka! Are you alright?"

Haruka squeezed her eyes together in my arms.

"Mm, I merely lost my balance..."

It's probably anemia or something similar! Haruka's skin, which was already extremely white, now became even paler...What do I do, should I ask for help from the shop assistants? Or should I call for an ambulance?

"Umm...Yuuto-san, I'm alright. I should feel better after resting for a while."

Haruka shook her head weakly as though she knew what I was thinking about.

"But..."

"Please don't make this into a big incident, I don't want to cause you any trouble."

...No choice, looks like I should respect Haruka's opinion.

"...I get it, either way, we should leave this store and find some place to rest...Please endure this for a while."

"Huh? Yuu...Yuuto-san!?"

I carried Haruka, whose eyeballs rolled into the back of her head, but this action was misunderstood as the

people around us started to cheer and whistle, leading me to run out of the store awkwardly.

...Whether it was carrying a princess in my arms, or being carried (of course I don't want to be carried like that), this was the first time that I've experienced something like this.

Looking for a place to rest, I ended up in a small park.

"It's....so tiring..."

I really carried Haruka in my arms while running. Though Haruka wasn't heavy (on the contrary, she was as light as a feather), since the club that I joined in school was the 'go-home club', it was still extremely tiring for the me who never exercises. God, I'm getting older now... Perhaps it's time to consider whether to buy the products from the fourth store. The kind of products that I'm talking about are the products that foreigners advertise to the people in front of the televisions in the wee hours of the morning, products like weird-looking all-enabling indoor track machines - "Hey! Nancy! I have something

really nice to give you today!" "Wow! Bill, what's that?" That kind of product. This product can be paid for in installments, only 12800 Yen including taxes...ah, that's just my impression of such advertisements!

"Hey, oh!"

Haruka probably fell asleep as I was carrying her, and she was sleeping as soundly as Sleeping Beauty. I placed her lightly on the park bench, and finally relaxed.

--She really did faint.

She really did wish to buy the limited edition silver PTA, and as all her expectations were dashed in that one moment, it was just like what people say, that the higher the expectations, the greater the fall.

Haruka, who was now lying on the bench, was breathing regularly again.

If she still doesn't wake up after a while more, maybe I should seriously consider whether I should call an ambulance. Although I didn't want to blow up the incident either, Haruka's condition was the top priority.

If I were to call an ambulance, should I use my cellphone, or use one of the public phones that are now as rare as a fossil? I mulled over the two choices as I turned to look at Haruka once more...

"Ah..."

Haruka had already woken up.

Coincidentally, our eyes met.

"..."

"..."

...This was rather awkward.

"Ah, are you feeling better now?"

"Ah, yes..."

Haruka nodded, looking a little nervous.

"Thanks to you, I'm feeling much better now, I think it's probably because I wasn't able to sleep properly yesterday night."

"Wasn't able to sleep properly?"

"...About that...Yes, I was really looking forward to today, so I couldn't bear to close my eyes, just like the night before I'm about to go on a trip..."

"I see."

"..."

"..."

We lapsed into silence.

It might have been less awkward if we shifted our gazes away from each other, but for some reason, we were unable to do that. My eyes just couldn't bear to move away from Haruka's beautiful features, her hair that was slightly wet from sweat, her lightly blushing cheeks, and her small, cute cherry lips. But, why was Haruka also staring unblinkingly at me?

I felt that my heart was beating furiously, my throat was parched, and even my breathing became rough and irregular. It can't be...are these the symptoms of cardiac arrest?...No, it can't be, I don't have any history of heart problems, and my body should be perfectly healthy (

even though my level of fitness is around that of a sixty year-old grandfather), and my meat intake was far lesser than that of the American Leopard, so that should count in my favor.

But...Why...Just what is happening?

This kind of charged atmosphere didn't change and just like in the last moments before an engine completely goes out, it will be working over-capacity, resulting in overheating.

I felt that if this were to continue for another 10 seconds, I could very well depart from this world. Just at that moment, a strange sound came from my pocket, breaking the tension.

"Ah..."

The charged atmosphere was broken.

<<The Ride Of The Valkyries>>

This was a tune from the movie <<Apocalypse Now>> , composed by Wagner, a tune with an extremely

frightening rhythm. This wasn't a ring tone, but a message incoming tone...Only one person would select this tune as the message incoming tone.

"Ruko..."

Just as I expected, three simple words appeared on the LCD screen of my cellphone: Message from Sister.

"Feel like eating curry tonight. Go and buy the ingredients quickly, be back before seven!"

...It wasn't any of my business whether she liked curry or not, but she's already twenty-three, and not only can she not cook, but she even pushes all the household chores to her younger brother (me)! What kind of woman is she, what kind of sister is she! And she even wants me to be back home before seven! I really have a lot of complain about, but only this time...Perhaps I should squeeze out some tears of gratitude for this timely message.

"A message?"

"Yes, from my sister."

All thanks to the timely appearance of the message, the tense atmosphere was completely broken down.

"You have a sister?"

"Hmm? Haven't I told you about her before? She's seven years older than me..."

"Is...Is that so..."

But this could only break the silence for a while, Haruka's cheeks were still flaming red, and I've also accidentally made a weird action...What should I say now?

Anyway, I have to divert the topic somehow.

"Yes, it's like that. Ah, right. Haruka, are you thirsty? I'll go get us some drinks, so just sit here and wait for me alright."

"Ah, alright. Then..."

"I'll be right back."

I let Haruka, who seemed to have something to say, sit on the bench before making myself scarce. Because if I continued to stay with Haruka, I felt that the atmosphere would become extremely awkward.

I bought red tea and coffee at a nearby vending machine, taking the opportunity to regulate my breathing and to calm myself down. I don't know what's happening, but I must first let my heart slow down to its normal rhythm. I breathed in and out deeply five times in a row (from an objective perspective, I'm really a strange person), finally managing to get my heartbeat back to an acceptably normal level. Whew, I think I'll be able to relax for now. I can't make Haruka wait for long, so I should go back now.

I ran back to Haruka.

"Here, this is for you. Do you mind red tea?"

"Mm, thank you. I like red tea very much."

I passed her the can of red tea that had the logo of a lemon of it. As Haruka brought it up to her mouth with a smile,

"Mm, it has a really unique taste, this kind...may taste nicer."

"Unique?"

This wasn't anything special, just a can of lemon red tea that could be bought anywhere.

"This is my first time drinking canned red tea."

...So that was why. In school, I've really never seen Haruka drinking canned or packet drinks before as she always brought her own teacup and thermos.

Looking at Haruka gulping down the red tea, I also started to sip from my can of coffee. A crow that was above me kept making melancholic cries, perhaps it had seven children waiting for it to come home in the mountains!

"About just now...I'm really sorry."

Under the setting sun, Haruka softly apologized.

"Fainting in front of so many people...I must have given Yuuto-san quite a bit of trouble, right?"

"Ah, it wasn't much!"

Though the looks that were cast on me from all directions were indeed rather painful when I was carrying the sleeping beauty in my arms, this wasn't Haruka's fault, and I did get something out of it.

"...I'm really very sorry. Yuuto-san specially made time to go shopping with me, but in the end..."

Haruka lowered her head.

"...I'm really useless. Because of my oversight, all the silver PTAs were sold out. Not only was I not able to complete the main objective of today's shopping trip, I also got Yuuto-san into quite a bit of trouble...I'm really really useless, as useless as 'Useless Girl Megu-chan'. If I had known this was going to happen, we shouldn't have come at all. Yuuto-san, you must be thinking the same thing right..."

Haruka gripped the metal can tightly as she took a deep breath. I could understand that Haruka was extremely depressed, but...she doesn't have to put herself down like this. And anyway, who's Megu-chan?

And also, there was a huge flaw in Haruka's logic.

"Wait a minute. It might have been due to your oversight that we weren't able to get the limited edition game console, and we do feel sad about not being able to get it, but...I didn't force myself to go on this shopping trip with you, I accepted your invitation because I wanted to go shopping with you.

That's the assumption that you've made which I want to challenge."

"Hmm..."

"Anyway...I enjoyed myself immensely today, I saw a lot of new things that I've never seen before (For example , cat-ear maids, cat-ear maids, and cat-ear maids), which is why I cannot agree with you when you say that we shouldn't have come in the first place if we had known that we'll be unable to buy the silver PTA. On the contrary, I feel that it is an honor for me to be able to accompany you on this trip."

This were my true feelings on the matter.

"Yuuto-san..."

Haruka started sobbing with her head leaned to one side.

"Sob...Thank you...Thank you very much. I...I also had a lot of fun today, this is the first time that I've gone shopping with someone...I'm really really happy today, though I'm sad at not being able to get the PTA, I'm really really sorry, and...and..."

"Ah, don't cry."

"Alright..."

Though Haruka agreed to not cry, her sobs only got louder and louder. I had an overpowering urge to offer her my handkerchief...but I realized that my handkerchief wasn't of good quality enough to be offered to another person, so I could only dig out a packet of tissue that was being handed out on the street (as for the company that was giving out tissues, it's a certain financial corporation whose president had recently been arrested).

"Sob.....Thank you."

Looking at Haruka using both the mass-produced cheap tissues together with higher quality silk tissues to wipe her tears was rather unbelievable.

It took ten minutes for Haruka to stop crying.

"We should get going..."

"...Right, it's getting late."

Haruka, who finally stopped crying, stood up from the bench with a smile on her face.

"But...I still feel depressed over the fact that we weren't able to get the silver PTA."

"We could go and ask the other stores whether they still have the silver PTA in stock the next time we have a day off."

Upon hearing my words, Haruka gave a shocked expression.

"Really?"

"Of course. Haven't I already said I also had a lot of fun today, and I also wish to be able to go shopping with you?"

"Ah, I'm so happy!"

Haruka skipped forward, while in front of her was---

"Haruka! In front of you!"

"Hmm?"

It was too late.

Bang. After that huge noise,

"...It hurts!"

...Haruka had knocked into a pole, which must have been really painful. Should this be classified as being an airhead? Or just plain clumsiness? But after looking at Haruka, I couldn't help but smile slightly.

"...Yuuto-san, it's mean to laugh at other people!"

"Hmm? I'm not laughing."

"Yes you are! You're laughing! And you're laughing really happily!"

Haruka smashed her small fists into my chest, of course, it wasn't painful at all.

"Yes, yes, it's all my fault."

"...I can't feel your sincerity."

"Really, I'm being really sincere over here."

What to do? I looked around me, hoping to find a way to get out of this tight corner, when I suddenly saw a rectangular shaped machine. That's it, that's the thing.

"Why don't we try that again as the last activity of the day? My treat."

I pointed to the capsule vending machine that Haruka had used during the day, and our current position was in the park right behind that store.

Haruka's indignant expression immediately changed to an excited one.

"Really!? Yay!"

I took out a hundred-yen coin and passed it to Haruka, who promptly threw it into the coin slot and turned the handle, causing a round capsule to roll out.

As she opened the capsule, Haruka suddenly shouted loudly.

"This is the one! This...This is...the 'Shy shy pose'."

Huh? What? Is she speaking Japanese?

"This is the favorite pose of the female protagonist of the <<Shy Triangle>> Aki-chan. Look, it's really cute isn't it?"

Resting in the palm of Haruka's hand was the figurine of a blue-haired girl who was lightly grabbing onto the hem of her skirt with her fingers. I see, this pose is called the 'Shy shy pose L'. For some reason, this pose seems strangely familiar?

"I'm going to treat it like a treasure!"

Haruka smiled happily as she hugged the figurine.

"...Treat this like a treasure?"

She was planning to treat this figurine with a strange-looking pose like a treasure? Could it be that Haruka likes this figurine more than the piano-playing one?

"This pose is very cute, so I really like it, and..."

Haruka blushed as she said...

"And...this is something that Yuuto-san bought for me. So it's extremely valuable, a most important piece of treasure to me."

She actually said something like that.

.....Now this was a predicament.

She was so serious and was blushing so furiously that I didn't know how to answer her, so before I could figure out my answer, my face was burning as I didn't dare to look straight at Haruka.

The cold wind of the sunset blew onto my face, and I took the respite given by the cold air blowing onto my burning face (about three minutes) to finally come up with an answer.

"...Please take good care of it."

.....To be honest, I don't know if that was a good enough answer, but at least I gave an answer.

My first shopping trip with Haruka ended like this.

On a side note, this was something that I heard from Nobunaga after the shopping trip, that the figurine with the strange pose seemed to be an extremely rare item, with only fifty of them in existence, an extremely valuable product...I really don't know how this society works sometimes...

Chapter 3

Although it was good to have sunny weather even after going into the monsoon season in June, the result of going into summer so early was that it became extremely hot. This was something that happened on the day that I got so fed up with the heat that I wanted to move to Australia to play with the kangaroos and koalas.

After school, I mustered up all my strength to clean up the music preparation room.

Firstly, I sorted the various papers into their respective categories, placing them back on the shelves and then I pulled out an amplifier from under the abandoned-looking conductor's stand. When I lifted a piece of music score from the teacher's table, a cloud of dust suddenly burst into the air like snowflakes.

"Cough Cough....."

The music preparation room looked as though it had been completely abandoned, just like the house of a useless man whose wife had divorced him and then kicked him out of the house.

"My god....."

I couldn't help but mutter.

I knew that the situation would be bad, but I would never have imagined that it was this bad. Looks like I've underestimated the potential ability of that person.

Looking at the music preparation room that could never be cleaned up, I sighed deeply.

As to why I'm cleaning up this place, it's all because of the owner of this room, the music teacher who is also my class teacher (A woman whom I have no resistance against).

I'll have to start from three hours ago.

"Yuu-kun~Are you free today?"

After the homeroom period, I had finished packing my bag and was just about to head home when the music teacher came looking for me. Her voice was as silky as the purr of a cat that was having it's chin rubbed by its master.

"No I'm not. My schedule is completely packed. I have absolutely no free time at all."

"I have a favour to ask of Yuu-kun~"

"I don't want to do it."

"If you're willing to do it, Onee-san will reward you for it~"

"I don't think I have a need for your reward."

"I have three types of set meals for you to choose from, how about that?"

"...I'm going home."

Since she pretended not to hear what I was talking about, I decided to just ignore this idiot and go home.

"Wait.....Wait up!"

My arm was caught in a vice-grip, this is not good.

"...What?"

"I've already said that I have a favour to ask of you."

"And haven't I already said that I'm not interested?"

Nothing good ever comes out of doing her 'favours'. I speak from my personal experience.

"Don't say that. Why don't you hear me out first?"

Looks like she won't let go of me unless I hear her out. I don't have a choice but to nod my head reluctantly.

"...Fine, I'm only going to listen though."

"Mm~Onee-san loves it when you say that."

She pressed me into her sizeable bust. The soft feel that came into contact with my cheek, and the flowery smell that floated into my nostrils was indeed extremely tempting, but if I were to admit defeat here, I would have fallen right into Yukari's trap.

"What do you want to say exactly?"

In response to my question, Yukari gave a strange expression before saying,

"To be honest~The year director gave me a direct order today~"

"What kind of order?"

"He wants me to clean up the music preparation room by today."

"...Goodbye."

I only managed to turn away before my arm was caught by Yukari's vice-like grip again.

"Wait! Why are you trying to run away before I finish what I have to say~"

"I already know what you want, you want me to help you clean don't you? Please clean up by yourself, I've already cleaned the toilet for you before."

"Ah, that's such a pity. Although you're close, but that's not what I'm here for."

"It's not?"

I was sure that I won't be wrong, since all this person does is to trouble others.

Or could it be that I'm wrong?

"Hmm, it's not like that. Because I'm not trying to get you to help me clean, but trying to get you to do it for me ."

Just what is going through this person's head!

There should be a limit to how shameless one can be!

"......Please die!"

I was already prepared to run for my life after throwing that phrase at her, but I would never have thought that Yukari would cling on to me for dear life.

"Hang on! I really want to help you, but I have something important going on today."

"What important thing?'

"It's SERAPH's live performance (whispers)!"

"...Huh?"

I thought that I had heard wrongly.

"SERAPH's having a live concert today, and I've already gotten my hands on the VIP ticket that I pre-ordered six months ago, so if I'm unable to go, I'll die because of this unfufilled desire."

"...You're serious about this?"

"Of course I am."

Yukari gave me a serious expression that I've never seen before as she replied. On a side note, SERAPH is the name of her favourite visual-kei band.

"Yuu-kun, I'm begging you, I really don't have anyone else to turn to, this is the biggest wish of my life."

Yukari attempted to climb on top of me while begging me with tears in her eyes.

Even though it was her own fault that things have come to this, but I was unable to just leave her in the lurch like that. I guess I don't have a choice but to help her then.

Since I have nothing to do after school today anyway, might as well let Yukari owe me a favour!

"...I've got it, so please stop trying to squash me from above, I'll clean the music preparation room for you alright?"

"Eh? You're willing to do it for me?"

"Yes, I'll help you for the time being."

Upon hearing my answer, the twenty-three years-old female teacher who was a diehard fan of visual-kei bands was filled with happiness.

"Thank you so much Yuu-kun, I love you!"

"...You're welcome."

That's basically what happened.

This is how I come to be cleaning up this heap of trash, but right now, I really regretted my decision.

"This is ridiculous..."

Due to the corrosive influence of the owner of this room, the sparkly clean music preparation room had become a nightmare island of rubbish in merely two months.Feeling despondent, I swiped off a layer of dust off Beethoven's portrait with a duster, while writing the word 'meat' on his dust-covered forehead. This primary-school level prank probably has the legendary musician turning in his grave.

Just as I tiredly prepared to magically wipe of the word that I had written on Beethoven's forehead...

Poron~~

I seem to have heard the sound of a piano.

At first I had thought that I was hearing things, so I just ignored it, but after a while, I realised that there was a melody to the notes. The melody was one that was sounded melancholic at times and and poignant at other times, while sounding sorrowful throughout, and it seemed to be coming from the neighbouring music room.I looked at the clock that was hung up on the wall, it was almost seven o'clock atnight, which means that all

the students who were involved in club activities should already have gone home by now. So why would there be anyone playing the piano at this time?

My first thought was of one of the school's seven mysteries - The piano that plays by itself in the music room.

It can't be?

I opened the door of the music preparation room quietly and surveyed the situation in the neighbouring music room. But from my perspective, the position of the piano was in my blind spot, which meant that I was unable to see the person playing the piano (hopefully it is a person playing the piano). But I could now confirm that the sound was indeed coming from the piano.

I hesitated for a moment before deciding to step into the music room. I slowly shuffled towards the piano while praying that a person was indeed playing the piano. As I gazed at the piano, what I saw was actually--

"..."

Haruka.

Bathed in the golden glow of the setting sun, Haruka was playing the piano.

Probably because she was too engrossed in playing the piano, Haruka did not notice my presence. Her soft fingers nimbly danced across the keyboard as I looked on , mesmerized.

The piece finally finished, Haruka breathed out.

"Good work."

"Ah?"

Haruka jumped at the sound of my clapping, her eyes wide with surprise as though she just saw a rhinoceros beetle in the middle of winter.

"That...That's strange? Why would Yuuto-san be here? There wasn't anyone here when I came in..."

Of course she would be surprised at seeing a person that shouldn't be here after finishing a piece.

I explained my predicament to her.

"Ah,I see, you must be tired."

Haruka's tinkling laughter swept away the tiredness from the cleaning that had built up in my body. She's definitely an angel!

"Speaking of which, why are you still here at this hour ?

In comparison, this should be stranger shouldn't it? It's not strange that Haruka would be in the music room, it's the timing that is strange.

"Well...It's complicated..."

Haruka tilted her head slightly as she replied.

"Enlighten me!"

I excitedly requested.

"Alright, I'll tell you then. To be honest, I was reading in the library a while ago when I came across this description of Shakespeare in a world history book..."

"Shakespeare? You mean that playwright?"

"Yes, I really like his works. He left behind an entire collection of brilliant plays, plays like <<Macbeth>> and <<A Midsummer Night's Dream>>.

"Ah...I see."

I nodded while feeling extremely guilty.

Because out of Shakespeare's works, I only know of << Romeo and Juliet>>, and only a rough outline of the story at that.

"But, how does that tie in with you playing the piano?"

"Because the tempest is mentioned in one of Shakespeare's plays. Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 17 also carries the name of 'The Tempest', which is why I felt like playing this piece when I saw Shakespeare's name in the book...I also have a performance coming up, so I had wanted to practice a little before I went home."

"I...I see."

Reading -> World History -> Shakespeare -><- The Tempest -->> Piano, so this is how Haruka thinks. A little complicated, but still understandable.

"Do you usually read until this hour?"

If she went straight to the library after school, then she would have read for about three and a half hours, probably longer than the time I read for the entire week.

"Yes, because mid-term exams are coming."

"...Mid-term exams..."

I was roughly hauled back to reality by those words.

Before that moment of enlightenment, I really had forgotten all about the mid-term exams (that is to say, I've been running away from reality the whole while). Two weeks from today, the dreaded mid-term exams will begin.

Although Hakujo Academy has a two-term system, which means that there are only four exams a year, students who failed the exams (thirty percent and below) would be forced to burn a third of their summer holidays on remedial lessons. Perhaps some people may think that thirty percent is extremely easy to get, but for people who aren't academically talented like me, it is an extremely dangerous obstacle.

"Is Yuuto-san also in the midst of preparing for the mid-term exams?"

"No, I haven't started preparing at all."

Since I just remembered that mid-term exams actually exist, I obviously have not even started on revision.

"Not at all? But you should already have a study plan for the next two weeks right?"

"Well.....I'm not very good at things like that."

I really don't like studying, but if I don't study, then I'll have to burn a third of my summer holidays. It's unthinkable to give up a third of one's once-in-a-lifetime seventeen year-old summer holiday and to be stuck in a small classroom with mountains of notes and teachers, whose tempers are hotter than the weather (Why is it that most of the teachers in Hakujo Academy are single and male?).

"Now that I think about it, my notes are not even complete....."

I spend seventy-percent of my time in class daydreaming, so my notes are extremely disorganized and incomplete; one entry in April, the next one in June.

"I've got to borrow someone's notes to photocopy."

Although I said that, but I had no one to borrow from. In the years leading up to this year, the best candidate was Nobunaga (his results are extremely good), but since we're in different classes this year, our notes aren't the same either. I probably have to borrow from the three idiots.

...Looks like it's a matter of life and death.

Seeing that I was getting flustered, Haruka gave a pensive expression as she placed her finger next to the corner of her mouth, her head tilting forty-five degrees to the side.

She held that position for about thirty seconds.

After thirty seconds, Haruka seemed to have thought of something, as she opened her mouth to speak,

"Yuuto-san, why don't we study together?"

"Hmm..."

Study? Haruka and I?

"That's right, if you don't mind, I can lend you my notes to photocopy, even though my notes might not be that complete either..."

No, there would never be anything incomplete about Haruka's notes, for she's always attentive in class.

"That'll be too inconvienient for you..."

My results and Haruka's results were at opposite ends of the academic spectrum, so borrowing her notes would be the vital boost that I desperately need to pass the exams, but this wouldn't benefit Haruka anyway, and could even cause her to be docked points if the teachers found out.

But Haruka shook her head.

"It's not inconvienient at all! Studying is more enjoyable with a partner."

Is that so? I always hear that studying alone would be more efficient. But as long as Haruka doesn't mind, this would be a life-saver.

"...Is it really alright?"

"Of course it is."

Haruka answered without hesitation.

"Then...Thank you very much."

I have to take this chance to turn my results around. If I continue like this, I'm in real danger of landing in remedial classes.

"Then, what about the time and place? You can just pick a time that you're free..."

"Hmm..."

Haruka thought about it for a moment.

"About the time...How about this Sunday? From one o'clock onwards, the place...how about my home?"

"Ah, I'm alright with anything..."

I answered without thinking.

"...Hmm?"

I suddenly realized that there was a strange noun in Haruka's suggestion. Did she just say 'my home...'?

"What's wrong?"

"No, it's nothing..."

My ears must be playing tricks on me. Haruka would never invite me to her home. I must have heard wrongly because I was expecting too much. Mm, it must be like that.

Seeing that I was in agreement, Haruka happily repeated the time and place.

"I'll see you on Sunday then, please don't forget about it!"

And so, I came to Haruka's home on Sunday to study for the mid-term exams.

I got lost.

"This is a map detailing the route to my home, it's only ten minutes away from the train station, so I don't think you'll get lost..."

I should have known something like this would happen the moment I received the hand-drawn map from Haruka, but I was too excited about being able to visit her home that I had completely overlooked the probable result if I were to follow her map. It was already too late when I took out the map at the train station near Haruka's home.

I took out the map that Haruka had given me and saw monstrous creatures and hysterical eight-eyed eels covering most of the map.

A wide-eyed bird-like, sadistic-looking creature was drawn at the side of the map. It had a satanic smile on its face as it drove a sharpened rod into the belly of an eel, the words on the sharpened rod reading 'it's here'.

...What is this? Is it some kind of psychological test for first-timers?

I really feel like crying.

A row of neatly written words at one corner of the map detailed 'Drawn by Haruka'.

Now...what do I do?

I attempted to go forward, but immediately got lost at the first crossroad junction. I wanted to call for help, but Haruka didn't have a cellphone, while I didn't take down the number of her home phone. There was an address written on the map, but since I didn't live around that area, I had no idea where it was, and to make things worse, there wasn't a traffic police in sight.

"I'm dead..."

Just as I was pathetically sitting at the side of the road like a tired bird, somebody called out to me from behind.

"Onii-san, what's wrong?"

I looked back to see a girl looking back at me. She looked like a middle schooler, with a pretty face and eyes that twinkled with charm. Her hair was tied down at the sides into two ponytails, giving her a mischievous but cute look. She would definitely become an extremely pretty girl in a few years.

"You've been groaning for a while now, are you having a stomachache? Do you want me to call the funeral car?"

"What, are you planning to send me to the crematorium?"

"Ah! I should be calling the ambulance in this kind of situation."

The girl laughed, but stopped almost immediately as she realized the seriousness of my situation.

"What do I do? I should call for help if you're really not feeling well, shouldn't I?"

She was serious.

"I'm not feeling unwell, I'm just lost..."

I suddenly thought that since this girl looks like she lived in the area, perhaps she would be able to understand the map. Maybe Haruka's map is a perfectly readable map to everyone but me.

And so I hopefully showed the map to the girl, who looked disgusted as she looked at the mep.

"What's this? Demons? Or the Tiger Lady?"

"..."

"Or are these ghosts?"

My last hope was destroyed in a moment...Well, at least I expected this reaction.

"...This...Should be a map."

Hearing the truth, the girl jumped in surprise.

"...A map? This is a map? That's impossible..."

"It's true."

I don't want to believe it either but this is really supposed to be a map.

"Hmm, it still looks like a drawing of ghosts and demons no matter how I look at it."

The girl looked at the map with the look of a person looking at a rare animal. I completely agree with her assessment of the picture.

"Are the giant snakes supposed to be roads? Ah! There's a weirdly shaped thing here! Ah! There're two Karakasas over here."

This girl's really jumpy.

"...Hmm?"

She suddenly quietened down when her gaze stopped on a certain portion of the map.

"...It can't be!"

And then, she mercilessly tore the map to pieces.

"Hey, hey....."

I can understand her painful feelings of wanting to tear the map to pieces, but destroying the map would also destroy any clue that I had to finding my way to the Nogizaka residence.

"Hmm...Onii-san, you'll never get to your destination if you look at this map!"

"Even then.....It's better than nothing isn't it?"

"It's definitely better to have nothing than that piece of map! I'll draw a new one for you, do you have any stationary with you?"

After tearing my only hope to pieces, the girl stretched out her right hand towards me. Although I don't know what she intended to do, but since she seemed to be willing to help me draw a new map, I quietly handed her my notebook and a pencil.

I let the girl have a look at the address written on one of the pieces of the map. The girl only took one look before beginning to work.

"This is how it should be."

Her pencil flying over the notebook paper, the girl drew a map for me.

"There, it's finished."

"Huh?"

Compared to Haruka's map, this map was on a completely different level! To be honest, I would even think that even comparing the two maps would be an insult to the girl's map.

"You're really good at drawing..."

Even a monkey could get to Haruka's home with this map.

"Not at all, it's actually a very simple route to your destination, and it should be harder to draw a map that resembles a drawing of demons and ghosts right?"

Though the girl said something like that, but anyone could tell that she was rather pleased with herself.

"But you really saved my life here, thank you."

"You don't have to say that! It's not something to be so grateful about. And also...I'm partly responsible for something like this."

"?"

"Ah, it's.....it's nothing! I'll be going now, see you soon, Onii-san."

"Ah, wait!"

Without any hint of acknowledgement, the girl left.

...Just what was that about? Well, at least I'm saved.

It was all thanks to the map that the girl drew for me that I managed to get to the Nogizaka residence safely.

Technically, even though I had already reached the Nogizaka residence, but...

"What is this..."

That was the first thing that I had to say after reaching the Nogizaka residence.

A huge door was in front of my eyes, along with a line of ridiculously tall walls that extended far beyond my line of sight. From far away, the Nogizaka residence looked like an estate that nobles in the middle-ages lived in, complete with a fountain like the one in <<Roman Holiday>>.

Is this place really in Japan? The estate in front of my eyes really made me question whether this was indeed Japan. I had known that the Nogizakas were rich, but... this is beyond the wildest imagination of normal people.

And that was only the beginning.

Seriously, that was only the beginning.

Immediately after I pressed the doorbell, a maid came out to welcome me. A real maid! Although I had seen cat-eared maids in Akihabara, but a real maid in a real Japanese household was right in front of my eyes! I was too shocked for words.

The maid bowed respectfully the moment she saw me.

"Ayase Yuuto-sama right? Haruka-sama is expecting you. Please enter."

"Ye...Yes..."

I didn't even have the time to be moved over being addressed as 'sama' for the first time in my life before I was whisked into the huge garden. Whoa! The garden of the Nogizaka residence was like a forest, with bubbling streams running through the residence like a natural park.

"This way please."

After walking through the huge garden, I finally stepped foot into the residence itself. The residence looked like a castle from the outside, and even more from

the inside. I've never been in hall with such a highly vaulted ceiling, and the luxurious decorations, ancient armor sets and art pieces were completely unknown to the son of a working class family like me.

"Wow, this is great..."

The Nogizaka residence was ridiculously luxurious.

Just as I was stupefied by the impressive entrance hall, the maid told me something extremely scary.

"Please follow closely behind me, it'll be dangerous if you get lost."

Could this place be a huge labyrinth? Judging by the scale of the place, a direction-idiot like me would probably die if I got lost here. I do not wish to get lost and embarrass myself in this place.

Following behind the maid, I turned seven corners, walked through two long corridors, went up and down three flights of stairs, finally reaching the living room (because the hall was extremely large, I didn't know if this was the living room or still the entrance hall), and finally

met Haruka. I spent twenty whole minutes from the moment I stepped into the residence to get to the living room...It's ridiculous!

"Ah, Yuuto-san, welcome."

Haruka was wearing a white summer dress as she smiled at me, standing up from an ancient-looking sofa in the middle of the room.

"Hazuki-san, thank you for bring Yuuto-san here."

"It's nothing, I'm merely doing my job."

The maid answered expressionlessly.

"Please sit down and make yourself at home."

In accordance with the maid's directions, I sat down on the sofa. What a soft sofa!

"Would you like some tea?"

"Ah, would you mind?"

Haruka replied to the maid's suggestion.

"Not at all. Which kind of tea leaves would you like to use."

"Hmm, how about two pots of Royal Bengal Tigers?"

"What about snacks? We have Madeleine, plum pudding and Victorian cakes in the kitchen right this moment."

"We'll have the plum pudding."

"Alright, please wait for about ten minutes."

The maid left after receiving her orders from Haruka. I couldn't understand more than half of the vocabulary that they used in their conversation. Royal Bengal Tiger? Is that the name of a monster?"

"Please wait for a moment, Hazuki-san makes really good black tea."

...It's actually the name of a tea.

I've only ever drank canned and bottled black tea, so I wasn't knowledgeable about the different types of tea at all, perhaps it's actually a very common type of tea?

Exactly ten minutes later, the maid returned.

She placed the cups and pudding in front of us before standing behind Haruka like a statue.

Haruka then turned to face the maid.

"Hmm...Let me introduce her to you. This is Sakurazaka Hazuki-san, she's the head maid, in charge of our accomodation."

"'Head' maid? So you're saying that there are more of these maids?"

"I am Sakurazaka Hazuki, it's an honour to meet you."

The maid gave a perfect bow together with her perfect greeting, but her face remainded expresionless throughout. Mm...Looking at how she interacted with Haruka a while ago, she seems to be the calm and collected type. Although she's really pretty, but she seems to be hard to interact with. I was quietly assessing her.

"Hazuki-san looks to be a strict person, but she's actually really gentle."

Did Haruka say that in response to what I was thinking in my head?

"A while back, she fed the leftovers from dinner to a stray cat. She almost always goes to the pet shop on rest days. Her hobby is collecting stuffed toys, so her room is filled with cute stuffed toys."

Stuffed toys? Hmm...I really couldn't imagine such a strict-looking person would have a room full of stuffed toys and even name each and every one of them.

"...Haruka-san, I can hear you."

Hazuki-san retorted softly. Hmm? She's actually blushing!

"Ah~Hazuki-san's blushing."

"......I'm not."

She seems to be a little lost as to what she should do.

The three of us talked for a while longer.

After talking to Hazuki-san, I realised that although she looked stern, she wasn't hard to interact with, as

she'll answer your questions and react to your jokes (she doesn't laugh, but at least there's a reaction). But the only thing that bothered me was that her expression almost never changes, means that you'll never know what she's actually thinking. But to that, Haruka said that 'You'll learn how to read the small changes in her expression once you get to know her better.' Hmm...Is that really the case?

So much had happened that I almost forgot what I was here for. I am here to study for the mid-term exams, not to get a feel of the upper-class lifestyle.

To achieve our original aim, we moved to Haruka's room after finishing our refreshments (I won't go into detail about the other halls, the dance floor and the mini cinema that I saw on my way there).

So this is Haruka's room...It's surprisingly normal.

Haruka's room is about thirty tatamis large, with a huge piano in the middle of the room and a luxurious-looking bed in a corner. Of course, this kind of room wouldn't be considered 'normal' in the usual sense, the normal that I'm referring to is the lack of any sign of Akihabara-influences in the room.

"Ah, please make yourself at home, I'll bring out the table."

Haruka said to me before she walked into a hidden closet to bring out the table. Judging by the size of that closet, it's probably bigger than my entire room.

I sat on the expensive-looking carpet before looking around the room once again. No matter how I look, this was the normal room of the daughter of a rich family, no Akihabara references to be seen anywhere.

This was really a room that looked like it belonged to the 'Nuit étoile', It would indeed be extremely strange if Haruka's room was like Nobunaga's with posters, manga , novels and figurines all strewn around the place.

Haruka brought the table out at this moment, so I asked,

"There doesn't seem to be any posters in this room."

"Ah, that's because..."

Haruka stopped abruptly. Hmm? Did I just ask something I should not have asked?

"Those things are really cute, and I really want to display them in my room if it were possible.....but.....I don't have a choice, because my family doesn't know about my hobby."

"Huh?"

Even her family doesn't know?

"My parents.....especially my father, he's extremely strict, so he'll probably throw all my anime posters and figurines away if he saw them. Because he thinks that these things are bad for my education, so I can't put them in places that are obvious."

Haruka lowered her head as she explained.

That's.....really too bad for Haruka. I seem to have gained an insight as to why Haruka lacks some common sense. And that's also because there's nothing that could be classified as entertainment in this room right? No television, no computer, this must be the reason why Haruka doesn't have a cellphone either.

"Oh right, is your family at home?"

I suddenly thought of her family.

If her father is at home, then I better go and pay my respects to him, or he'll think that I'm a good-for-nothing who's here to corrupt his precious daughter if he sees me.

"I'm the only one at home today. Father's at the Pentagon, mother's teaching at the cooking school that she runs, it'll probably be midnight when they return. My grandfather's in Hokkaido hunting bears, so he left in the morning....."

"....."

My god! Just what kind of person is her father? I could possibly disappear from the face of the earth if I make one wrong move.

Not noticing my feelings, Haruka happily continued talking,

"So you can relax, just treat this place as your own home. Let's start with English, since it'll be tested on the first day of the mid-term exams."

Haruka really wasn't the top student in the level for nothing, as she nonchalantly did her own set of practice questions while helping me with the foundation

questions given by the school, pointing out my mistakes and explaining the solution to me at the same time.

"Ah this is a special usage of the future tense, so you can translate it as "After moving to the city, he never went back to his home village ever again", that is to say, he might have invested a large sum of money after he moved to the city, but it turned out to be a failed investment, and not able to find a job, he could only work part-time in a convenience store. And in the end, because his landlord refused to renew the rental contract, he got kicked out of his apartment, and so he died alone in a public park, with his dreams of returning to his home village as a rich man shattered."

"Hmm,mm...I see....."

"This question tests your ability to differentiate between verbs and adverbs, and in comparison with the former "stopped to smoke", the meaning of the latter is " to stop smoking". Which is to say that the first sentence refers a middle-age smoker who's in the late stages of nicotine poisoning and couldn't help but stop for a smoke at the roadside or some other place where it's illegal to smoke, and got fined for it. As for the second sentence, it refers to a person who really liked to smoke,

but later quit smoking for the sake of his child, and now hates smoking to the extent that he'll want to kill anyone who smokes in front of his child."

"...Hmm, even though I won't know about the middle-aged man's condition regarding nicotine poisoning, but I guess that's probably it..."

Although Haruka was teaching me this whole time, our study session was proceeding rather smoothly. Even when she was teaching me, her right hand was still writing down the answers to her own practice questions.

"Oh, and this is..."

Just as Haruka-sensei was about to launch into her n-th explanation of the day, her left hand suddenly knocked my eraser off the table and onto the carpet.

"Ah, I'm sorry."

Haruka stretched to pick up the eraser, but I was closer to it,

"It's alright, I'll pick it up."

"No, I'll..."

Miraculously, we reached for the eraser at the same time.

"..."

"..."

My fingers came into contact with something soft. Definitely not my eraser.

My heart started pumping into overdrive.

"Ah.....I....."

"I.....I'm sorry!"

I hurriedly pulled my hand back, my heart still beating furiously as though I was on drugs and overheating. My face was also burning up as though I just came out of a hot spring.

What's going on! What a strange atmosphere! I looked over and saw Haruka blushing furiously, just like that time in the small park at Akihabara...If I were to describe the atmosphere in terms of colours, then the middle of this room would be covered in a shade of pink...

Haruka's slightly moist eyes were right in front of me.

Now that I think about it, right now, Haruka and I were the only ones in this room. By the only ones, I mean that there isn't anyone other than the two teenagers in this enclosed space. From this, the keyword that we'll naturally think about it.....Secret room murder?

Not that! But if it's not that keyword, then I really can't think of any other keyword that's so, encompassing.

No,it's not the time to bash myself over my lack of imagination.

Anyway, I have to think of a way to pull away from this pink-shaded atmosphere, because if this goes on, my sense of reason will fly off like a satellite that's gone off-course, all the way to the other end of the universe..... Alright, to calm myself down, I shall start counting prime numbers. Starting from 0.....Hmm, is 0 even a prime number?

Shouldn't I be starting from 1? Hmm, that doesn't sound right either...

My brain suddenly got itself into a knot.

My mathematics results are so bad that my math teacher came to me with tears running down his cheeks, ' I'm begging you, even if you're able to promote to the third year, please don't come for the science class mathematics lesson, alright?' That's basically a guarantee letter certifying that I'm an idiot.

.....I'm so pathetic to call myself an idiot.

I turned to look at Haruka's face feeling sorry for myself and realized that Haruka was also looking at me.

Our eyes met! Haruka's face reddened even more, as she fidgeted around in her seat and looked away awkwardly before closing her eyes slowly as though preparing herself..... That's strange, why did Haruka close her eyes?

Another ten seconds passed like this.

Hmm...it'll would be an insult to Haruka if I were to do nothing at this juncture wouldn't it? I've never been in such a suggestive situation before, so I really don't know what to do.

Now that it has come down to this, I only have two choices, either I go with the flow and don't think about

the consequences, or I pretend to fall asleep. After struggling with myself for a while (that is to say, after my mental condition deteriorated for a while), I was about to choose the first choice when...!!

"Please forgive me for breaking the nice atmosphere between the two of you."

Someone suddenly spoke from behind us.

"!?"

I turned around to see a maid stand behind us.

"Argh!"

"Kya!"

"...Do I look that scary?"

The maid answered our screams of terror with a mildly disappointed expression. No, that's not the point, the point is, since when has she been standing there?

"I knocked five times, but no one answered, so I had no choice but to let myself in."

No... Even if all my focus was on Haruka, it was impossible for me to not know if someone had come into the room. This maid is scary.

"Ha,Hazuki-san, is there anything you need?"

Haruka hurriedly changed the subject.

"Yes. Mika-sama just returned and has something to talk to you about, are you free right now?"

"Hmm? Mika?"

"Yes."

Haruka was a little confused.

"Umm...Haruka, who's Mika?"

"Hmm? Ah, I haven't told Yuuto-san about her, she's my sister."

"Sister? I didn't know that Haruka has a sister."

"Yes, she's in the second year of middle school."

Not that she mentioned it, Nobunaga seemed to have mentioned it to me some time ago.

"I'm sorry, I'll go over to Mika's for a while....."

"Mm, I got it."

"I'm really sorry...I'll be right back, please relax and rest here for a little while."

After Haruka and the maid left, I was the only one left in the room.

Haruka wants me to relax, but I was unable to calm myself down in such a big room, feeling like a lab rat that has just been released from its cage into a huge laboratory.

It was really boring to just sit here, so I decided to take a tour around the room.

The first thing I looked at was the the large piano in the middle of the room. The maid had said that it's a Steinway grand piano...anyway, this is a branded piano

that costs around 20 million yen, something my family could never afford. Even if we could afford it, we don't have anywhere to put it.

"..."

I suddenly felt this strong sense of defeat as I couldn't help but shift my gaze away from the piano.

I walked towards the bookshelf opposite the piano.

There were many music scores placed on the shelf, Beethoven, Schubert, Chopin, Liszt, Schumann, Brahms, I only knew the composers that my music teacher at school had introduced to the class.

"Could it be.....that Haruka can play all of these pieces ?"

<<Twelve Super Technical Practice Pieces>>... Although some of the scores sounded extremely hard, but I guess Haruka should be able to play all of them right? She was probably playing a super technical practice piece the last time I heard her play in the music room.

All of a sudden, I saw a book without a title hidden between the music scores. This book was covered with a classy white cloth, and was obviously treated more importantly than the music scores.

"What's this?"

I was curious as to the true identity of the book.

I took the book down from the shelf and unwrapped the cloth around it.

"..."

It was a comic book.

"...This..."

No, to be precise, this should be a comic magazine, it's an old magazine that's the same size as a music score. The name of the magazine is,

<<Innocent Smile>> First Edition.

--Ah, that's the one.

Looking at the name of this magazine, I was reminded of how Haruka and I snuck into the school library at midnight about two months ago. This is something that Haruka loves, the magazine that started everything. The magazine had 'First Edition', so it should be the one that I saw at the library the other time, the magazine that got Haruka interested in the world of anime and manga. This magazine was the only thing worthy of Haruka's careful protection.

The magazine in Haruka's memory...

My gaze locked onto a smiling long-haired girl on the cover of the magazine.

"...Hmm?"

She attracted my attention deeply.

Why would I be attracted to that drawing? I don't know, but it seems to have awakened some distant memory in my mind.

"Yuuto-san, Mika wants to say hello, would you mind?"

Haruka's voice came from outside the room.

"Of course I won't mind!"

I don't have a reason to reject a person who wants to say hello to me, and I'm also rather interested in Haruka's sister. I should think that her sister would be just like her, a natural Ojou-sama right?

"Is that so, Mika will be really happy. Let's go in, Mika!
"

"Alright!"

A lively girl walked in from the other side of the door.

"Hmm? This..."

"Hehe, good afternoon, Onii-san, we meet again!"

It's the girl who drew the map for me! She's Haruka's sister?

"Ah, don't be so surprised! Onii-san's such a naive person. Didn't I said 'see you soon'?"

She did say something like that. But...How could she have known that I was Haruka's friend?

Seeing that I was still confused, the girl came over and whispered into my ear.

(Because only my sister could draw such a demonic-looking map, plus her name was on the map.)

...Ah, so that's how it is.

(And also, Onee-san had mentioned that a guest would be coming today.)

The girl giggled again. Her innocent expression was exactly the same as Haruka's, proving that they were indeed sisters.

"...Demonic-looking drawing?"

Haruka asked confusedly.

"Ah, it's nothing. Onee-san, introduce him to me!"

"You're right, but it looks like the two of you already know each other...Yuuto-san, she's the sister I was talking to you about earlier..."

"I'm Nogizaka Mika, fourteen years old this year. My hobbies are playing the violin and rearing wild boars. Onii-san, please take good care of me!"

"..."

I seemed to have heard something impossible when she was talking about her hobbies. Well, I guess I should just pretend that I didn't hear anything!

After putting my own feelings in order, I started to introduce myself.

"Mm, I'm Ayase Yuuto, Haruka's classmate, please take good care of me as well."

"Ah...Yuuto-san?"

That's strange, why would Haruka's sister have this kind of reaction to my name?

"Mika, he's older than you, it's rude to address him by his name..."

"It's alright, I don't mind, it's just that...is my name very weird?"

"Ah, hehe, it's that..."

"?"

"It's nothing much, just that you call Onee-san 'Haruka'."

Haruka's sister, Mika, looked at Haruka and I with strange smile on her face.

"What do you mean?"

"Is there a problem?"

"Nope, it's just that there aren't a lot of guys who refer to Onee-san so intimately..."

Is that so? Well, everyone in school does seem to address Haruka as either Nogizaka-san, Haruka-sama, or the 'Nuit Étoile', and if a guy wanted to address her by her name directly, he'll have to go through the same punishment as I did (rolled up into a grass mat and thrown into the water). If I wasn't a guy who liked to step on such landmines, we probably won't have such a relationship right?

"It's.....It's nothing special! It's just that, Yuuto-san is my classmate, and, we're friends, so.....so....."

"Hmm, Yuuto-san...it's my first time hearing Onee-san calling a guy by his name."

From Haruka's faltering answer, I could see how the relationship between this pair of sisters worked.

Seeing that Haruka was uncertain as to what to do, I decided to step in.

"Don't make any wild guesses, Haruka and I are just friends."

In truth, this explanation wasn't exactly correct, but since Haruka's family didn't know about her special hobby, so this should be how our relationship should look like on the surface shouldn't it?

"Onee-san, is that right?"

"Ye...Yes, we're just friends, our relationship isn't that spe.....special."

Haruka answered in a suspicious manner.

Mika looked at Haruka as she gave a suggestive smile.

"Hmm, I see, so that's how it is."

"What do you mean?"

"Nope, nothing. If this continues, I think I'll be able to dig out all sorts of interesting things, but since I've gotten the gist of things, I'll let the two of you off today."

"Oh, right! Onii-chan, please call me Mika from now on!"

"Got it."

"Great."

Haruka's sister was surprisingly different from her. If Haruka's the moon, then her sister would surely be the sun.

After that, I never got to touch my books again.

Under pressure from Mika, we played monopoly, international chess, and pieced puzzles together.....and spent several hours like that.

"Mika, Yuuto-san's here to study."

"Ah, it's alright, just a while, just let Onii-chan play with me for a while longer."

"You..."

Although Haruka's tone carried a hint of displeasure, she actually didn't seem to mind it much.

"Yuuto-san, I'm really sorry, Mika usually doesn't warm up to people she just met for the first time. If you don't mind, please play with her a while longer..."

"I'm alright with it."

"Yay, then lets play poker cards next."

And thus, I ended up feeling as though I was here to play instead of studying, but...I guess it's not a bad thing to just relax and enjoy myself! There should still be sufficient time to prepare for the mid-term exams next week, things will surely work out (I'm just running away from reality).

It was already evening when I looked at the time.

Haruka invited me to stay for dinner, but as I had a problematic sister who would go out of control if she wasn't fed at home (sometimes a problematic music teacher would be there as well), I had no choice but to regretfully reject her invitation.

"I see, that's such a pity."

"I'm really sorry to reject your invitation like this, I'll make sure to prepare dinner for her before I come next time."**(!)**

"Prepare dinner? Yuuto-san, do you have a dog at home?"

"Ah, yes..."

The two were similar in that 'both need to be taken care of', but 'she' would probably be unhappy about being put on the same level as a dog.

"A dog...Ah, that's right, there's still a bit of the plum pudding we had earlier left. If you don't mind it, please bring it back for your dog."

"No, I wouldn't want to trouble you."

"No, not at all, please don't stand on ceremony, I think your dog will like it."

Haruka jogged out of the room to tell Hazuki-san about the plum pudding. She really seems to think that I have a dog at home.

"Well, I guess she's not far off the mark..."

There isn't a lot of difference between the two anyway.

"Onii-san, come over for a while!"

"Hmm?"

Mika beckoned towards me. Could it be that she wants to show me Haruka's childhood photos while she's out of the room?

I went over expectantly.

"Onii-san, did you have fun on your date at Akihabara ?"

"!?"

She suddenly asked me something like that.

"You went on a date with Onee-san right? That's great, did the two of you hold hands? Did you guys kiss?"

My tongue got tied into a knot due to the flurry of questions thrown at my direction; why would she know about that?

"You..."

"What are you talking about..."

"Hehehe, there's no point in pretending, I know everything."

"Pre,pretending? What are you talking about..."

Since she mentioned Akihabara, she must be referring to the shopping trip that I went with Haruka last month, she can't be referring to anything else. But, how would she know about that? Even if she was trying to get me to divulge certain information, but don't you think that it's a little too accurate?

Mika probably saw through my inner dismay as she continued with her next wave of attack.

"Hmm, you're still pretending? But I have proof you know. It should be the Sunday of that long weekend right? Because Onee-san happily went out wearing her new clothes on that day you know."

Seeing my trepidation, Mika gave me the finishing blow.

"Onee-san even prepared a special 'shopping bookmark' for Onii-san, you know, that demonic-looking drawing."

"..."

I had no choice but to confess.

"How do you know about that....."

Seeing that I finally admitted defeat, Mika flashed a victorious smile.

"Hehehe, because I saw the 'shopping bookmark'! But it's not my fault, because Onee-san placed it on the table in the living room right in full view of everyone."

"....."

"I took a look at it and saw two copies of the 'shopping bookmark'. One copy had 'specially for Yuuto-san' written on it. At that time, I was still wondering who that mysterious 'Yuuto-san' was..... Until I heard from Onee-san that a guest named 'Yuuto-san' was coming today."

"Ah.....I see."

I understand now, If it really was like this, then of course Mika would know about our shopping trip.

It was really something that Haruka would do, absentmindedly forgetting something on the living room table. Though Haruka seemed to be perfect on the surface, she had an inclination to slip up at important moments. But I was already used to this inclination of hers.

"Right--Could I ask you something?"

".....Please do."

Right now, I don't think any question would make me more surprised than I already am now.

"Onii-san, you also know about Onee-san's secret right ?"

"Eh....."

This was something I wasn't expecting.

Speaking of Haruka's secret, she could only be referring to one thing, should I just answer her? No, Haruka's family do not know about her secret don't they? Or did Haruka tell Mika? God.....I'm getting more confused by the minute.

"Onii-san, so do you?"

"About this.....no....."

"Ah, just by looking at you I think that you should know about it. You'll be better off if you were more honest."

Mika said as she tickled my sides.

"Hey.....Hey.....I'm really ticklish!"

"Then answer my question! Hehehe"

"Ughahahahahahaha.....Stop.....Stop it....."

"hehehe"

After a few minutes of fooling around, Mika asked me again with a serious expression.

"Onii-san, please answer me seriously. Do you know about Onee-san's secret?"

"....."

Although I hesitated for a moment, but I still decided to tell the truth. Because something about Mika's gaze told me that I should.

".....I know about Haruka's secret. I stumbled onto it by mistake, but Haruka told me everything after that."

"I see."

Mika's expression brightened considerably.

"Mm. I guessed as much. A woman's instinct is the most accurate thing in the world."

Mika smiled as she explained her rationale.

"Then, can I ask a question now?"

"Sure, what do you want to ask?"

"How do you know about Haruka's secret? She hasn't told her family has she?"

Although she might have guessed by looking at the ' shopping bookmark', but Mika's tone suggested that she has known about it for a long time already.

"Ah, about that."

Mika gave a slightly exasperated smile.

"Hmm.....Onee-san did try very hard to hide it, but Hazuki-san and I have known about it for ages, because Onee-san never tells lies. I think my parents are the only ones who have not found out about it yet. But I know that Onee-san really wants to hide this secret of hers, so I haven't told her that I know her secret."

She didn't even stumble over such a long line of words . Mika thinks extremely far for a girl of her age.....looks like she's a really good sister. In comparison, I really want to exchange my sister for a bag of toilet rolls.

I finally understood how Mika came to know of Haruka's secret.

But there was still one last thing that I didn't know.

"Why did you assume that I also know Haruka's secret ?"

Regarding this, Mika should have been rather confident of my answer before asking me. But I already had been very careful in hiding the fact that I knew.

"This is easy. Onee-san would never invite someone who doesn't know of her secret to Akihabara, and she even prepared a special demonic drawing.....Ah, no, I mean, she even prepared a special hand-drawn map."

".....You're right."

Her explanation made a lot of sense.

"And.....even if I don't go down that line of thought, it's easy to guess at the truth from Onee-san's facial expression."

"Facial expression?"

"Yes. Because I've never seen such a happy expression on Onee-san's face before, until today. That expression means that she's giving you her heart. It definitely means that she's giving her heart to you. I guess that's because she's able to show her true self in front of you."

".....The real Haruka.....you say?"

The Haruka that I see, is more real than the 'Nuit Étoile ' that people in school sees.....Is it because of the fact that I know her secret? I've only noticed recently that Haruka's actions in school are a little awkward, and that even when she's smiling, there's a small distance between the other students and her.

"I believe that Onee-san doesn't dislike Onii-san, and that this is something she's clear about, I also believe in my own assessment that Onii-san's a good person."

"Mm."

Both of them say that I'm a good person when I'm not as good as they think I am.

"Onii-san."

Mika's expression suddenly changed, as she looked at me with a serious expression on her face.

"No matter what happens.....please don't abandon Onee-san."

"Abandon....."

About that.....No matter how you look at it, it should be the other way round isn't it? Because Haruka is the ' Nuit Étoile', while I'm just an average student!

But Mika shook her head.

"Onee-san had a period of painful memories when the people around her found out about her secret. Because everyone around her felt that she should be a perfect Ojou-sama. In other words, they forcibly expect Onee-san to be the perfect person that they imagine her to be, which is why they would abandon her once their perfect image of Onee-san has been shattered. In actual fact, Onee-san's just a clumsy girl with a strange hobby."

Perhaps.....it's really like what Mika says. There's a Haruka fan club in school, but how many of those fan club members would know about this side of Haruka?

And how many of them would be able to look at her the same way they did before once they know about this side of her? A girl who gets addicted to capsule machines, who loves to read weird manga, who cries because she wasn't able to buy the game console that she wanted..... This would never be part of the image of the 'Nuit Étoile' that everyone in school has of Haruka.

"I think the Onee-san needs someone beside her who doesn't look at her through a rose-coloured lens, so.....no matter what happens, please be good friends with Onee-san, because I.....never want to see an abandoned Onee-san crying ever again....."

Mika bowed to me as she spoke.

Mika really cares about Haruka. I can see that she's a really good girl from the way she speaks and her attitude towards me.

".....Don't worry, I will never abandon Haruka."

I placed my hand on Mika's head and told her using my kindest voice.

"Mm....."

Although I hesitated for a moment, but I still decided to tell Mika about my feelings.

"Because Haruka's a very important friend of mine, and also....."

"And also?"

".....I.....I think she's very cute. Whether it's her natural clumsiness or her strange hobby, I think she's really cute. "

If I didn't feel this way, then I wouldn't have gotten into so many incidents in the two months after I found out about Haruka's secret (Breaking into the school at midnight, being ignored by all the members of Haruka's fan club etc)

"Onii-san.....You're just like what I thought you would be like!"

Mika happily shouted as she hugged me tightly. The twin tails at the side of her head swished past my nose, bringing with it the same scent that Haruka has, probably pointing to the fact that they use the same shampoo. For a moment, I had the impression that the person in my lap was Haruka, and that.....

Just at this moment.....

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

The door opened with a click, announcing Haruka's return.

"The doggie's present has been prepared.....Huh?"

"Ha.....Haruka....."

Haruka walked in with a paper bag in her hands, her gaze coming to rest on Mika and I.

"Haruka, no, this is....."

This is the worst timing. Because from an objective point of view, it looks as though I'm the one who's hugging (or attacking) Mika.

"Mi.....Mika! Say something!"

"Onii-san felt that I was too cute for words, so he suddenly hugged me. And then situation just continued as how such situations would continue, kya~"

Now's not the time to 'kya~'!

Not knowing what to do, my body stiffened like a husband caught in bed with a lover by his wife, but Haruka merely smiled.

"That's enough, Mika, you shouldn't trouble Yuuto-san anymore."

"Alright~!"

Mika let go of me as she gave a mischievious look, while Haruka continued smiling at Mika, what's going on?

"......Haruka, you're not angry?"

"Hmm? Why should I be angry?"

Haruka replied me confusedly, as though a question mark suddenly popped up in her head. It looks like she doesn't think that there was anything wrong with Mika hugging me.....

For some unknown reason, I suddenly felt extremely sad.

"Onee-san's really slow about such things."

Mika latched onto my arm as she nodded knowingly.

"This is one of Onee-san's good points, as well as one of her bad points."

"?"

"Ah~ It's nothing if Onee-san doesn't understand. Onii-san, the most important thing is still....."

"Hmm?"

Mika turned her gaze from Haruka to me as she said with a serious expression on her face,

"I know that Onee-san frequently gets into accidents, but.....no matter what happens, please take good care of her.....Onii-san~!" (This Onii-san is different from the other Onii-sans as Mika's calling Yuuto 'brother-in-law')

Is it just me, or did that last 'onii-san' sound a little different from the ones that came before it? Or did I hear wrongly? I must be be imagining things.

"Then.....I'll see you tomorrow."

Haruka, who saw me to the door, said her goodbyes reluctantly.

"This is the leftover pudding that we had in the afternoon, and some other presents."

A hand-drawn hellhound looked at me with demented eyes beside the words 'For Doggie-san' on the package that Haruka gave me. Looks like the contents of this package must be something extremely valuable.

"Then.....I'll see you to the train station....."

"Even though I'll really like that, but I don't think you need to. It's not a long way to the train station, so I'll be able to get there by myself."

I rejected Haruka's suggestion reluctantly since it's only ten minutes to the train station (while it took me twenty minutes to get to the entrance from the 'castle' in the Nogizaka residence)

"Onii-san, be careful on your way back!"

"Please come again soon."

Mika and Hazuki-san also came to see me off.

"Goodbye."

I waved to the three of them before turning to walk towards the train station.

Just like that, I had a beautiful day.

Not only did I get to meet two interesting people, Hazuki-san and Mika, I also got much closer to Haruka. Although I got lost on my way to Haruka's home, jumped on from the back by that soundless maid, and also interrogated mercilessly by Mika, today was a beautiful day for me.

I hope that I'll have more days like this in the future.

What comes after this is not important to the story at all.

When I gave Haruka's present to the doggie-san in my home.....

"Wow, this is delicious! The pudding's good, but the smoked meat is great to go together with Japanese sake. Although the taste is a little too light for my liking, but

the person giving the present has been generous enough, so I'll probably be struck down by heaven if I complain anymore."

"......Smoked meat?"

So there was something like that in the package? Oh, right, Haruka mentioned something about other presents .

I suddenly had a bad feeling about the package! I peeked at the 'thing' beside my sister.

It was a paper bag that read 'High class beef jerky'. Only thing is.....it also read 'for dogs'.

"......Argh!"

I was lucky that my drunk sister didn't notice as she happily stuffed the beef jerky into her mouth. And so I kept my eye on my sister as I quietly transferred the beef from the paper bag into another plastic bag before throwing the paper bag into the dustbin (to destroy any evidence). Because if my sister found out.....she'll kill me.

"Hmm? What's wrong?"

"Ah,it's.....it's nothing, it won't taste as nice if it gets wet, so I placed it in another bag."

"Oh, thank you."

After saying a rare 'thank you', my sister reached for the beef jerky again. Looks like she really likes the taste of this beef jerky (for dogs).

Oh well, it's not like she'll die from eating it. And I've also heard that recently, pet food is becoming even classier than human food, so I guess it won't be a problem right?

".....I think I'll go sleep now, you should sleep early!"

"Alright, I'll go sleep when I finish this bottle."

Just like that, I was able to leave the living room without getting killed.

In the end, the beef jerky (for dogs) that Haruka gave me that day, all went into Ruko's stomach.

Chapter 4

July.

After the mid-term exams, the entire school was extremely boisterous as the summer holidays would soon be here. Some students were discussing holiday plans, while there were others who had decided to confess their feelings to someone before the graduation ceremony, and thus was extremely nervous.

Having managed to successfully stave off the threat of holiday classes (I barely scraped through quite a few subjects), I was chatting with the three idiots and a block head (Nobunaga, but subjectively, people probably think of us as the five idiots) as usual during the lunch break.

"It's summer, so we should go to the beach. The crashing waves, the hot sun, the burning sands, and the passionate watermelon-hitting competition. This is how we Japanese people relax.....but why are there only guys! "

"You're right. Our second choice is to go into the mountains to get away from the heat, this is how a Japanese summer should be.....but we might be attacked by bears!"

"Ah, right. We could go to the nearby park to drink, play, sing and strip through the night, this is the true joy of summer.....but we'll probably get arrested!"

Looks like all three of them didn't like summer, which would explain the babbling.

"Speaking of summer, we have to go to Yumei."

Even Nobunaga was starting to babble.....Yumei? Is he planning to go to the Kyuushuu Islands?

"Hey, Yuuto, what do you think? Real men should go swimming right?"

Naigai suddenly asked me. Is he trying to drag me down into this as well?

"No, no, no, the UV rays at the beach are too strong, they're not good for health. Camping in the in the mountains full of fresh air is the clever thing to do."

"Don't you think that having a party at the public park is the best choice? We won't need to spend a lot of money too."

"Doujinshi is still the best!"

The four of them turned towards me at the same time.. .This.....is so boring!

I'm alright with anything, be it climbing up mountains or swimming in oceans (I didn't really understand what Nobunaga was talking about), but there'll be lots of problems if everyone were to go together. Because.....No matter where we end up going, I have full confidence in their ability to get into trouble. And the worst part about these holiday proposals is that only guys are involved (in other words, it's not very tempting).

"Ah, I think I'll abstain."

Because no matter which proposal I support, someone will be unhappy, so it'll be better not to say anything.

"You're too much, king of patronizing!"

"I believe that I've warned you about changing this patronizing habit of yours before, you'll get into big trouble one day if you don't change."

"Tsk! Stop being so indecisive!"

"Yuuto, you've always been indecisive, so much so that you take a lifetime to even order your food at a restaurant....."

They were going at it again. But now that I'm used to it , it doesn't bother me.

I slump onto my desk, trying to ignore the four of them.

--Speaking of summer holidays.....What will Haruka be doing?

I suddenly started to be very interested about that.

I really do not care about the holiday plans of the three idiots, but on the other hand, I am extremely interested in what Haruka is planning to do for hers.

Haruka's from a rich family, so she'll probably spend her holidays either enjoying life on a southern island or playing sports in Karuizawa right?

I looked over to the other side of the classroom. Haruka was enjoying a cup of tea while reading, her graceful posture giving everyone the image of an elegant

Lily. Although the book that she was reading had a luxurious cover that was full of the smell of literature, but ever since that day, I know that what's on the surface may not be the real thing. Please don't drop that cover in front of other people!

Haruka suddenly stopped reading and gazed towards me, our eyes meeting. She blushed with a little embarassment, but still smiled and waved at me. Ah~ She's too cute.

If it was possible, I would rather go out with Haruka then to go on some trip with the three idiots.....Ah, I seem to be getting too full of myself. Even though we've been rather close these few months, but I don't think we're close enough that she would consent to go out with me during the summer holidays.

Then again, it couldn't hurt to ask...

"Hmm? You're asking whether I have any plans for the summer holidays?"

"Yes, are you planning to go anywhere?"

I took the chance after class to ask her about her plans in the corridor. With her head slightly inclined to the side , Haruka answered my question a little mischievously.

"Hmm...I've already decided to go to my family's summerhouse in Hayama. I have a piano concert in August, and after that I'm going to play tennis with my grandfather in Oze."

"I see."

Just as I had expected, Haruka's summer was packed with all the activities that daughters of rich families do.

"Hmm, what else do I have.....Ah, there's a place that I would like to go."

"What would that be?"

"The Summer Comiket."

.....And what is that?

"I read on on <<Innocent Smile>>, they seem to be selling the limited edition figures of the tea ceremony versions of <<Clumsy Girl Aki-chan>> and <<Useless

Girl Megu-chan>>.....I think it'll be a really exciting event."

Haruka looked like a maiden in love when she was talking about the Summer Comiket. Well, at least I know what the Summer Comiket is now.

"Where will this be held at?"

"It's at the Tokyo International Expo. I don't dare to go by myself, so I was thinking of giving up, but....."

"We can get there by taking the Lily Pelican....."

That place wasn't very far.

"If you don't mind, I'll go with you!"

I tentatively made a suggestion.

"You.....You don't mind?"

"Of course not!"

"Thank.....Thank you!"

Haruka stood up excitedly, she seems to be really happy.

After celebrating for a while.....

"I have to go, I'm on duty today."

Haruka said to me before walking away with a huge grin on her face.

Although it was still a little lacking (or a lot?) in temptation, but I had already decided to go somewhere alone with Haruka during the upcoming summer holidays.

After saying goodbye to Haruka, I was accosted at the school gate.

"Hey~ Onii-chan!"

"Hmm?"

I've heard that voice somewhere before.

I looked in the direction of the voice and saw a lithe figure waving at me in front of the school gate.

"Mika?"

"Hehe~I haven't seen you for a long time, onii-chan."

I walked over to Mika, who was wearing her school uniform.

"What's happening? Are you looking for Haruka?"

"Hmm, it's nothing much, it's just that I was in the area , so I wanted to go home with onee-chan. Is onee-chan still in school?"

"She, is, but she won't be coming out right away."

Because Haruka's on duty today, so she probably won't be out for another twenty, thirty minutes right? Now that I think of it, it was a little weird that the 'Nuit étoile' is on cleaning duty.

"I see. Well then, onii-chan, would you mind talking to me until onee-chan comes out? Since I don't get to see you often...Or do you have something more important to do?"

"No, I'm free."

I don't have a girlfriend, I have no job, and the only thing that I need to do is to prepare dinner for Ruko before seven, which means that my schedule after school is completely blank...I feel really sorry for myself.

"Wow, that's great!"

Mika jumped up excitedly. Personally, I'm alright with it, but it's not a very good idea to jump when you're wearing a skirt.

"So how has your relationship with onee-chan progressed lately?"

Mika suddenly shot a question at me in the midst of her excited jumping.

"Well...How do I put it, it's just like that."

Although we've agreed to go out together during the summer holidays, but there hasn't been any special progression other than that. Because if I were to appear to be too close to Haruka in school, I will be constantly harassed by her fan club, which is also the reason why we're unable to talk to each other in peace in front of other people.

"Hmm~This won't do! If this carries on, god knows when onii-chan will become my brother-in-law."

Mika latched on to my arm after saying that.

"Hey...Hey!"

"Hehe, don't mind me, I just want a real onii-chan! And right now, onii-chan's the top candidate for the position of my brother-in-law."

Mika smiled mischievously.

"Or are you saying that you don't like me?"

"No, of course not....."

Anyway, Mika's extremely cute, and it's not like she's sticking to me with malicious intent. It'll probably be quite good if I were to have a younger sister like her.

It's just that--

"If you were to do this in front of other people, I think there'll be problems..."

The two of us had been the center of attention ever since Mika latched herself onto my arm.

Everyone who walked past us were whispering to their friends about us.

I overheard a few lines of what they were saying.

"That girl's a middle-schooler isn't she? Is the guy trying to hit on her?"

"But she's been calling him 'onii-chan', maybe they're brother and sister?"

"This 'onii-chan' is obviously fake. It seems to be the ' onii-chan' here has the same meaning as 'otou-san'"

"How could he do such a thing!"

Another group of people were also talking about us.

"Don't you think that girl's really cute?"

"Yes, she looks rather familiar though..."

"Who?"

"Hmm..."

"What is that guy trying to do? Hit on her?"

"How could he try to hit on a middle school girl in front of our school gate in broad daylight!"

Right after that group of people, another groups of people walked past us.

"Isn't that Ayase from year 2? I heard that he tried to hit on Haruka-sama..."

"He's trying to woo another girl without taking his eyes off Haruka-sama?"

"He seems to be enjoy being called 'onii-chan'"

"They're even locking arms.....Pervert!"

"...Why don't we kill him?"

"If we call for Haruka-sama's defense force, we should be able to get about twenty people within five minutes."

The last few sentences I heard made me fear for my life .

I suddenly felt an acute sense of danger, my instinct telling me that my life will be in danger if I were to stay here any longer.

"Ah, onii-chan, your face looks really pale, are you feeling unwell?"

Mika leaned towards me.

Sharp gazes from the people around us were immediately directed at me. This is bad...I'll really be murdered if this goes on.

Which is why I must get out of here (a tactical retreat).

"Ah...Mika, I'm sorry, but I suddenly remembered something important that I have to do, so I---"

"Eh? Mika? Why are you here?"

Just as I was going to pull out from this dangerous place, I was cut off by a voice coming from the school building.

It was Haruka.

Having just finished her cleaning duties, Haruka had an enchanting smile on her face as she walked towards us. This is not good, I will look more suspicious than I already am if I leave the moment Haruka comes out.

"Hey, hey! It's Haruka-sama..."

The appearance of the 'Nuit étoile' caused a commotion among the crowd, with many people fumbling in their bags to take out a weird looking headband which they promptly tied around their foreheads.

"Does Haruka-sama know that girl? They seem to be very intimate."

"Ah...Could she be Mika-sama?"

"Who's that?"

"How could you not know? That's Haruka-sama's younger sister!"

"Now that you mention it, they really do look alike."

"She's so cute..."

"But why would Haruka-sama's sister be holding onto that guy's arm so intimately?"

"...Has he gotten his dirty hands onto Haruka-sama's sister as well?"

"He's stepping on two boats at the same time..."

The atmosphere suddenly became extremely heavy after that last sentence.

"...Hey, assemble the Haruka-sama defense force, get as many people as you can! This fellow...didn't just make a move on Haruka-sama, he even has designs on Mika-sama! Tell the guys with baseball bats and shinais to bring their weapons!"

"Yes sir!"

The atmosphere suddenly turned to that of a gang fight. This is bad! This is really bad!

"Mika, now that Haruka's here, I think I'll take my leave. See you tomorrow, Haruka."

"Ah~Why don't we walk back together for a short distance, we don't really get a chance like this often~"

Mika firmly locked her arms around my left arm.

"Ah, that's right, I rarely have the chance to walk home with Yuuto-san."

Haruka grabbed my right shirt sleeve.

"This.....This....."

Normally, I would say that I was holding two beautiful moon orchids in my hands, but under the current circumstances, the moon orchids looked more like flowers at a funeral (my funeral).

"Excuse me, Ayase-kun."

Someone suddenly grabbed my shoulder from behind forcefully.

I looked back and saw a guy the size of a bear, with a white headband wrapped around his head and an expression as hard as stone. He glared at me as though he was looking at the person who murdered his father.

"I would like to talk to you for a moment, would you mind following me to the back of the school campus?"

His eyes glinted dangerously. I seem to have seen him somewhere...Ah! He's the ace of our school's karate team (he was ranked third at the nationals). Rumour has it that he just sent five delinquents from another school into the hospital a few days ago...

"Ah, I won't take up too much of your time...Because it'll only hurt for a moment."

Because I could literally smell the danger in the air, I desperately mouthed 'Save.Me.From.Him!' to Mika and Haruka, to which they nodded as though they understood me perfectly.

"I see, onii-chan, you should have told us that you had promised to go with a friend!"

"Since you're going with your friend, then I guess we don't have a choice. Even though it's such a pity, but you better go with him!"

The two of them smiled as they announced my death sentence.

"That was not what I meant..."

My escape bid failed miserably...They actually thought that Mr. Karate was my friend...

"Well then, onii-chan, we'll be going now."

"Goodbye, Yuuto-san."

I could only watched as the two sisters turned their backs to me.

"Hey! This way, the defense force is waiting for you."

I was forcibly dragged in the opposite direction as Haruka and Mika.

Luckily for me, Nobunaga suddenly appeared out of nowhere (it seemed as though he had been watching the whole incident from the moment I came into contact with Mika) and helped me escape the Haruka-sama defense force (He whispered something in the ear of the karate ace, who promptly turned green and ran away). But ever since that incident, I became a class A wanted criminal in Haruka's fan club, and was forced to sneak around in school for quite a while after that.

On another day, a similar incident occurred.

That day, I was once again accosted by Mika at the school gate (she has been coming rather frequently), and after enduring the cold stares of the normal students, I was dragged towards the back of the school campus by Haruka's fan club as usual. But luckily for me, I managed to break free of Haruka's fans to run back home. But I heard two people laughing loudly the moment I stepped into my home.

"Hahaha, this is so funny."

"Ahahahaha, it really is."

One voice belonged to Ruko, and the other, was also a very familiar voice. This voice brings an inexplicable sense of pressure to anyone who hears it, so it can only be her!

I suddenly felt more exhausted than I already was.

At that moment, I had the urge to just rush up to my room. But if I don't greet the two people in the living room, the consequences will be dire (Like using the school's PA system to call me into the office, or forcing me to sing <<Give me another toki-doki love>> etc). Which is why I know from experience that this was

something I had to do, and it was with a heavy heart that I walked into the living room.

"I'm back."

"Oh, you're back."

"Yuu-chan, you're back! Sorry for disturbing you again !"

Just as I had expected, there were two people on the sofa: My idiot sister, who was sitting with her legs crossed, and her best friend, the music teacher, Yukari, who was waving to me from her seat on the sofa.

"..."

The two of them were already working, so how is it possible that they reach home before high school student such as myself? It's only half past four in the afternoon, so why are there two empty Japanese sake bottles on the table already? I had a lot of questions in my head. But I knew that if I treasured this life of mine, it was better not to ask at all. Oh well, I'm used to these two (drunkards) anyway...But something even worse happened immediately after that.

"You're later than usual, did anything happen?"

"Nope, nothing happened."

My sister stared right into my eyes. I deliberately looked away. I don't want to tell them about Haruka for the time being, because offering conversation topics to two drunkards (two very ill-mannered drunkards) was like offering an arm to a hungry tiger.

But...

"You didn't do anything strange to Haruka and her sister did you?"

I didn't say anything, but Yukari had a creepy Doctor Faustus-like smile on her face as she held a bottle of Japanese sake in one hand.

"......What are you talking about?"

"Trying to hide it from me? It's useless, because I already know all about your relationship with Haruka and her sister from the information that Nobunaga provided."

That guy knows that I'm interested in Haruka, but he's definitely not the type who would go around gossiping about people. He may be a little patronizing at times, but he's definitely a man of principles. So even though he knows everything about my relationship with Haruka, he wouldn't tell a certain music teacher who likes to sexually harass other people.

"It was rather hard getting him to talk at first, but the moment I told him 'I'll treat your body very gently', he talked. He said 'Ah, I get it! I'll tell you everything...No, I thank you for the chance to tell you everything, Ahhhhh ~I still want to preserve my virginity! Yuuto, forgive me!' "

I have no idea what they were threatening to do to him .....But for the sake of my mental health, I refrained from thinking about it. I was still rather sympathetic towards my childhood friend who seemed as though he was going to be used as a human sacrifice.

"Nobunaga's information was accurate and detailed. His reports about how you talk to Haruka secretly, how you went over to Haruka's home to study for the exams, how you flirted with Haruka's sister at the school gate

were extremely accurate...It was almost as though he had witnessed the events with his own eyes."

From the way Yukari was talking, it seemed as though Nobunaga had really told her everything he know. In other words, that guy know everything about Haruka! Ah! This is bad!

"...Hmm?"

Don't panic! Analyze the situation calmly!

I wouldn't be that surprised at him knowing about how Haruka and I secretly talk to each other in school, and also about the incidents with Mika, but how in the world did he know about me going over to Haruka's home? I've never told anyone about that before...

"In an information-driven society such as ours, even though their are safeguards in place to protect privacy of individuals, but as long as you know how to go about doing it, it's very easy to access such information..."

I recalled the words that Nobunaga had said to me.

"..."

I finally realized how scary Asakura Nobunaga is. He's definitely a stalker.

Yukari looked at the stunned expression on my face and continued.

"Actually, I already had an clue about you and Haruka before I asked Nobunaga because you've been rather famous in school lately! When I heard people talking about how not only did that fellow try to stick his dirty paws into the 'Nuit étoile', he also has designs on her sister, and that he must be a pervert, I had a feeling that it was you, Yuu-chan."

...That's strange, why would Yukari think of me the moment other people talk about perverts?

"Because Yuu-chan is a very perverted boy, so the chances of you being the pervert that everyone's talking about is very high."

"..."

In response to my wordless protest, Yukari's response was crisp.

"...Yuu-chan, you shouldn't be too interested in little girls, I didn't educate you to become that kind of person.."

She continued in this vein while acting as though she was the caring older sister.

"Yuu-chan, because of your character, you'll definitely be bullied by young girls."

"..."

I should have known that being Yukari, babbling is the only thing that she'll do. But then, I'm really getting angry listening to her.

"Ah, Yuu-chan, are you angry?"

"...Yes, I'm angry."

Anyone would be angry after being labeled a pervert.

"I'm sorry, so please don't give me that scary face. I'm joking, even though the part about having a clue about

you and Haruka was true. Because you've always been unable to leave Haruka alone, and the incident after the after-school activity is only one of them."

If she uses this to bombard me, my heart will be very painful.

"Yuu-chan, you're like a male zebra during the mating season. You're channeling all your pent-up desire into Haruka. I'm trying to stop you because of the potentially disastrous consequences. Do you know that it is an extremely tiring job to hold down a wild animal full of pent-up desire?"

"Don't talk about your own fantasies as though they were real!"

You haven't done anything at all!

"Don't be like this, being in love is a good thing. It is because of love that humans are able to develop such a high level of culture. Love is the savior of the earth! LOVE AND PEACE~"

Even though it sounds like a piece of profound knowledge that she was trying to impart, it was actually only drunken rambling. The more Yukari continued to

ramble, the more excited she became, even giving me a thumbs up.

"How about this, Yuu-chan? Let's save the earth together!"

"I'll have to politely decline!"

When facing a drunkard who was practically drowning in a sea of pink, my answer only took half a second.

"Ah, I've been abandoned! Ruko, Yuu-chan's being so cold towards me."

"...No, I don't want you to be my sister-in-law either."

"Sob, sob, you siblings are like the wind from the north pole, cold and heartless..."

I decided to ignore the crying drunkard for now.

"I still have some homework to do, so I'll go up to my room now. It's not a bad thing to drink sake, but please don't drink too much. You, too, Ruko."

"Don't worry about it."

Even though I knew that Ruko's reassurance cannot be believed, but I hoped to at least prevent them from blowing fire in my home (Loading up their mouths with 96% alcohol-content vodkas before spitting it all out at the fire coming out from a lighter. This is very dangerous , good kids shouldn't imitate something like that.), so that I won't have to call civil defense.

"...Please be careful."

Just as I opened the door of the living room to walk towards my room...

"Yuu-chan."

Yukari called to me in an extremely serious voice. I looked back and saw Yukari with an authentic teacher's expression on her face (she really is a teacher anyway).

"...I only want to say one thing."

"And what might that be?"

This felt more serious than usual, as I answered her statement with a question while trying to calm the sudden wave of nervousness that had washed over me. Yukari answered me in an extremely serious voice.

"...Older girls are still better than younger girls. Just the difference in technique alone is nothing the younger girl can make up for..."

"Stop it, I've had enough of this!"

...This person has been lost to the world.

Ever since I got closer to Haruka, my life has been something like this.

Chatting with the three idiots and Nobunaga in school while trying to get a sneak a chance to talk to Haruka privately, and then being teased by Ruko and Yukari at home. Sometimes I'll go shopping with Haruka, and for some unknown reason, Haruka would ask me to go shopping with Mika as well.

All in all, my life has changed a little ever since I've come to know the real Nogizaka Haruka.

Most of the time, this change has brought nothing but trouble.

But I like the life I have now.

Because right now, my life is much more interesting than the boring one I've had before getting to know Haruka.

On a certain day after school, two weeks before the start of the summer holidays.

On Yukari's orders, I trudged towards the staff room. Hearing someone call out my name, I turned around to look back at the corridor.

"Yuuto-san~"

Looking in the direction of that mesmerizing female soprano, I saw Haruka beaming as she waved to me at the other end of the corridor.

"Yuuto!"

I've been marked again.

Everyone walking in the corridor was looking at me, and a significant number of the looks seemed to be hiding their murderous intent. Am I reading too much into it? But I did recognize a few faces when they were still wearing headbands.

But Haruka was still smiling like a wind that no one knows the direction of...

"I've brought the 'thing I told you about the last time'. If you're free, would you like to look at it together?"

She started to run towards my direction, but...

"Ah! Haruka! Be careful!"

There was a rag that someone probably forgot to pick up after cleaning duty on the ground between us.

"Eh?"

Haruka, who was completely engrossed in running over that she didn't look at what was beneath her feet, stepped onto the rag with ridiculous accuracy.

"Eh...EH...?"

Under the eyes of the audience, Haruka flew.

"Ah...Kya!"

After flipping over in midair, she landed heavily onto the ground.

The three actions of Running->Slipping->Landing heavily was done with acrobatic fluidity.

"It...Hurts..."

Haruka was rubbing her waist gingerly probably because of the fact that she had fallen onto the ground. The things in her bag was scattered all around her.

Just as I was going over to help Haruka up, I suddenly realized that the looks of the people around us were a little strange.

They looked like they had seen something that they shouldn't have seen, their gazes a carbon copy of the look of a female butler who's assassinating witnesses from a hiding spot, and these looks were concentrated on Haruka.

At first, I thought that everyone was looking at Haruka because you don't get to see the 'Nuit étoile' step on a rag and fall down.

But when I saw the magazine beside her that looked like a dictionary of demon summoning, I understood what kind of looks those people were giving Haruka.

Those were looks of disgust.

'The thing I told you about the last time'!

Coincidentally, the magazine was flipped out to the page with a drawing of a blue-haired girl who was in the exact same position as Haruka right now, as she sat on the ground holding her butt. The drawing was captioned 'Clumsy girl Aki-chan clumsy position No. 3'.

Everything seem to freeze in place for a moment.

Right now, the atmosphere in the corridor was as awkward as how a karate master would have felt if he got hit in the face by his disciple while trying to show him how to block an attack.

"I...I did it again..."

Haruka sheepishly mumbled as she sat on the ground, not knowing the dire situation that she was in. But almost immediately, she realized that her surroundings were too quiet.

"Ah...What is wrong with you people?"

"..."

"Umm...Why is everyone so quiet?"

Haruka looked at me confusedly, as I didn't know how to answer her. Seeing that I was unable to answer her question, Haruka looked around, as the people whom she looked at looked away uncomfortably.

"?"

I could literally see the question marks floating on top of Haruka's head as she tried to make sense of the current situation.

"Yuuto-san, what's going on..."

She looked at me again helplessly.

"Eh...?"

Haruka finally noticed the object of personal interest that had dropped onto the ground.

"Ah, why did the 'Summer Comiket Doujinshi'...Hmm ? Eh?"

Haruka's face suddenly turned as pale as the student who fainted during the principal's speech during morning assembly.

"Eh? I remember placing it in the innermost part of my bag, so why would it..."

Haruka mumbled to herself nervously as she tried to accept the current situation.

"Haruka, perhaps you should get up first?"

I helped Haruka straighten out the edge of her skirt that had been crumpled by the fall before offering her my right hand, but Haruka was acting a little strangely.

"Ah...I...I..."

"Haruka?"

Haruka looked around her blankly, her gaze shifting between the two sides of the corridor.

"No...Don't...Please don't look at me like that. I...I..."

"Hey, hey, calm down..."

Haruka didn't seem to be able to hear me as she buried her face in her hands as she shook her head vigorously, as though she wanted to shake the looks of the people around her out of her head.

"I...I..."

And then, tears started to roll around in Haruka's large eyes.

"Sob..."

And then, Haruka abruptly got up from the ground, grabbed her bag and ran off.

"Ha...Haruka..."

I was left behind together with the magazine that had started all this, the piercingly painful looks now focused on me.

"Was...that really Nogizaka-san's magazine?"

"I don't know, but it definitely fell out from her bag."

"How is is possible that the 'Nuit étoile' would have such a thing..."

I heard the whispers all around me. This was bad! If this goes on, Haruka's secret will be exposed, and even if it isn't that bad, the whole school will still be talking about it. If things really come to that, then Haruka will surely be extremely upset. To be honest, I really don't want to see Haruka cry.

I have to do something!

Now that it has come to this, there was only one solution to this problem.

"Ah! It's here!"

I pointed at the magazine on the ground as I deliberately raised my voice.

"This is the magazine that I've been searching for ever since I lost it three days ago! Yes, it is the right one! I see, Nogizaka-san must have helped me pick it up. She's really a great person!"

...After forcing out every single cheesy sentence that I could remember, I realized that I really don't have any talent in acting.

But the people around me still bought it.

"...That's right. How could Nogizaka-san be reading something like that."

"Nogizaka-san is really a kind person, instead of throwing it away, she was actually looking for its owner. "

"Isn't that fellow Ayase from A class? He's good friends with Nobunaga, so it's not really a surprise that he reads something like that."

"Hmm, I never thought that Ayase would have that kind of hobby. Looks like his reputation's completely destroyed."

"Is that right? I never knew that he had a reputation in the first place."

"Whatever, let's just go!"

The people around me started to walk off as as they talked among themselves (please don't talk about other people's reputation).

...Phew, looks like they believed my story.

I patted myself on the chest as I started to pick up the things that had dropped out of Haruka's bag. There were textbooks, a notebook, a pencil case, some music scores, and that magazine.

Haruka must have landed really heavily if all these things flew out of her bag. Even though they were scattered all over the place, I had picked everything up within a minute.

"Sigh..."

I stood up.

No matter what happens, I guess this incident should be over. Haruka's secret didn't get exposed, so I just need to secretly return this magazine to Haruka tomorrow. But I was a little worried about her strange behavior. Perhaps she overreacted like that time in the library (where half the library got destroyed) because it all happened so quickly!

My explanation for Haruka's behavior was very simple .

However, it seemed to be a little too optimistic.

Because Haruka didn't come to school the next day.

"That's right, after French impressionist composers like Debussy and Ravel started to feature prominently..."

Yukari was writing on the black board on the podium. Even though her handwriting was like a high school girl's handwriting, she was very familiar with the content of the lesson.

"...the main characteristics of impressionist music is that it tries to break free of the shackles of classical music in three main ways: Melody, harmony, and rhythm. In short, impressionist music places emphasis on composing on instinct, through personal feelings, as opposed to stubbornly forcing out music in a mind chained by the rules of classical music..."

Yukari's explanation reflected her thorough understanding of the subject. Even though she's like a perverted middle-aged man on the inside, this person is a surprisingly good teacher...Anyway, Yukari would be the prime example of how a person's character and her teaching ability is on completely different levels of the mind.

But I was unable to pay attention to Yukari's lesson, and the reason is not just because of the fact that I've always found music to be boring (if I dared to say it out loud, a metal fist will come flying towards me), but also because I was worrying about something else.

Haruka's seat was empty again.

Three days after the incident, I still wonder if I had done the right thing.

I sighed deeply in my heart.

Today was the third day that Haruka had been absent from school.

Ever since the 'Dropped magazine incident' (my own name for it), Haruka had been absent from school. I had asked Yukari about it, but only got sexually harassed in response.

"She's not feeling well~What did you do to make her so tired?"

Because the amount of energy expended while trying to get Yukari to talk wouldn't be worth the information I'll get, I wisely chose to drop the issue.

Is Haruka really just feeling unwell? It can't be, right?

I was still thinking about the magazine in question that was currently in my bag. Now that I think of it, Haruka probably overreacted because she thought that her hobby was exposed.

But no matter how much I thought about it, someone as stupid as me was unable to make any sense out of the facts available to me.

But no matter what, I can't leave Haruka alone like this .

--I'll try visiting her!

If Nobunaga and Yukari knew about what I intended to do, they'll probably laugh at me for exaggerating the seriousness of the situation (although from my perspective, they were more like ghosts who haunt me all the time), but I'm really worried about Haruka.

And so, I decided to go visit Haruka after school.

Do you guys have a problem with it?

Ever since that incident, something else had changed around me.

"Again..."

Nowadays, a pile of letters will fall out whenever I open my shoe locker. Of course these aren't love letters, but hate mail cursing me and expressing their disgust towards me.

"Sign....."

I threw all the letters into the furnace. I had wanted to just leave them there on the ground, but these letters all had my name written on it, so if I don't get rid of them, I'll probably be seen as the person responsible for writing all the letter. The hate mail writers are really smart to even take that into account! If they were willing to use those brains of theirs in more constructive ways, our steadily regressing standard of living would be better wouldn't it?

I sighed as I opened up a few of them.

"Don't go near Haruka-sama! You pervert! Don't let Haruka-sama come into contact with something like that! FUCK!"

"Someone like you will never be good enough for Haruka-sama! You're way out of your league! Stupid otaku!"

"You better not have made a miniature figurine of Haruka-sama, you pervert!"

The letters were full of incendiary words.

I sighed deeply.

I've received such hate mail before. But the contents were not as hateful as the ones I've been receiving. The previous ones merely said things like 'Don't smile to Haruka-sama like that' or 'Don't appear within 5 meters of Haruka-sama, and don't breathe the same air that she does'. Thanks to Nobunaga's manipulation of the information that went around the school, the letters stopped for a while, but ever since that incident, I started to receive massive amounts of hate mail again, and some strange-looking people had even contacted me.

"...I can't take this anymore!"

In any case, the 'Fellow who always sticks to the Nuit étoile (me)...is a perverted otaku' seems to have been accepted as an undeniable fact by the school population. The reason for this is obviously because of the incident a few days ago. But this time, I can't ask Nobunaga to help me out of this, because the moment people think that the magazine isn't mine, they'll start to suspect Haruka. But because it's Nobunaga after all, since he joyfully came up to me and said, 'Wow~Yuuto, it's great that you've finally found your true calling and joined our ranks!',

I guess I could try to ask him for help.

"I don't understand...Why does everyone hate otakus so much?"

Or maybe they just don't like me!

When I settle down and think of it, the second possibility is higher. Because Nobunaga, a self-admitted otaku hasn't been subjected to the kind of treatment that I've been receiving, and on the contrary, most people actually think of him as the school mascot because of his friendliness and interesting characteristics. Some people really like him too (because he looks like a bishounen).

I can only draw one conclusion from the facts at my disposal.

"...In other words, I'm being subjected to this treatment because of who I am?"

I was felt a little depressed at that deduction. Sob, sob, just what did I do to deserve this...

But, it won't carry on like this forever, right?

As the saying goes, no rumor ever goes on for more than a month, so hopefully, everyone will forget about me after a while. Not thinking too deeply into things is one of my weak points, but conversely, it's also one of my good points.

I threw the rest of the letters into the furnace.

To be honest, I was more worried about Haruka. I intended to go to the Nogizaka residence immediately after burning all the hate mail.

But just as I was rushing towards the school gate...

"Hey, Ayase-kun! It must be hard to have to throw the rubbish again today right!"

A guy with slightly long brown-dyed hair sneered as he blocked my path.

...Who is this guy?

Even though this is the first time I've seen this person, but for no reason, I really didn't like him. Just like how most girls instinctively hate cockroaches, I instinctively disliked this guy.

"Ah, where are my manners. I'm Sasaoka Shyuuto."

He smiled cynically as he nodded his head.

I've heard that name before.

He's the ace of the basketball team, and had been rejected by Haruka before (I bet he has gone for plastic surgery before). Because he's a little weird and is a chronic skirt-chaser, he's the most famous year 3 senpai in the school, and also the person that most people didn't want to be connected to.

"...And what can I do for you, Sasaoka-senpai?"

I was very sure that it won't be anything good, but I still asked politely.

"Nothing much, I just want to get a good look at the otaku who's sticking to Haruka-san like a parasite."

"...You really have a lot of free time."

Just as I had expected.

How is it that I'm never able to guess any questions correctly in exams, but have a 100% success rate in guessing such random things? After sighing to myself for my bad luck, I looked straight at Sasaoka.

"...I think you've seen enough. Can I go now? Unlike you, I actually have something to do."

I pushed Sasaoka away as I tried to go around him, but Sasaoka continued to give that cynical smile of his that made me want to punch him in the face and continued to block my way.

"...Just what do you want?"

"Hang on, I just want to tell you something."

"Get to the point!"

I want to get this over with within 3 seconds.

"It's simple...Do not harass Haruka-san anymore! You make me sick! I don't want to see someone who gets excited when looking at figurines of strange girls to get close to Haruka-san. In other words, Haruka-san's too pitiful to have someone like you around her!"

In actual fact, Haruka's the one who'll get really excited when looking at figurines of strange girls. Oh well, why am I even wasting my time listening to this person's incessant babbling.

"That's it? Then I'm going."

"Wa,Wait!"

"Now what?"

This person's really annoying.

"You should have heard what I've just said right? I want you to swear that you will never go near Haruka-san ever again!"

"I won't do it."

"It's good that you understand...Eh? Hang on, you refused to do it..."

"That's right, because I don't have to listen to your mindless rambling."

I would have thought that this much was obvious.

"...Gah!"

Probably because my answer was extremely unsatisfactory, Sasaoka took a step back, the expression on his face the mirror-image of the prime minister who has just failed to assassinate the king.

"Hmph, hmph, alright then, I'll let you go today, since you'll soon be dumped by Haruka-san anyway, because you're an otaku!"

He spat at me.

Oh well, I should get away from this place as quickly as possible.

Just when I finally got rid of Sasaoka and got to the school gate...

"Onii-chan!"

Mika was standing right in front of the school gate.

She had her hands on her hips with her legs apart as she glared at me. Whoa! Just what did I do to make her so angry?

"Onii-chan, just what did you do to onee-chan!"

What's with that question!

"How can just assume that I'm the reason for this incident!"

But Mika conpletely ignored my protests.

"Because you're the only person who can make onee-chan so miserable! Onii-chan, did you force onee-chan into some kind of weird cosplay?"

Mika shouted at the top of her voice while blushing furiously...I'm begging you, there're students everywhere because school just ended, so please don't shout 'weird cosplay' in front of so many people!

"Did you force her to cosplay as a sexy nurse, or a bunny girl, or did you force her to wear nothing but an apron..."

Mika started to become more specific.

Just as I feared, looks of disgust were shot at me from every direction, now they really think of me as a pervert...Well, not like I can do anything about it, so I'll just let them think whatever they want to think!

"Hey, it's not because of me that Haruka's like this."

Mika gave me a suspicious look in response to my explanation.

"You're lying! Why else would onee-chan become like this? She's locked herself in her room every since she came home three days ago, and she hasn't eaten at all! And she keeps playing pieces like 'Funeral March', and ' Dance of Death' on the piano..."

That's really scary.

"We even heard onee-chan crying in the middle of the night...This is like what happened when she was in middle school..."

Mika's face suddenly lit up as she seemed to have understood something.

"...Don't tell me onee-chan's secret has been exposed?"

Mika lifted her head to look at me as she waited for the answer.

"Nope, it was almost exposed, but nothing happened in the end."

"Then why..."

"Hmm...Maybe because Haruka mistakenly thought that her secret had been exposed. From what you've said, I guess being sick isn't the real reason for Haruka's absence from school."

"Ah, yes..."

Mika nodded her head cautiously.

"Onee-chan said that she wasn't feeling well, but she's definitely lying. Father and mother haven't really given it much thought , but...onee-chan's acting exactly the same way as that time, Hazuki-san's very worried about her too."

"You mentioned 'that time'?"

"Ah, that's..."

For someone like Mika to stutter, it must be something really serious.

"You don't have to force yourself to tell me..."

"...It's not like that."

"But if you don't mind, I would like to hear it, because this is probably related to how Haruka is acting now."

Mika lowered her head as she thought about it.

"...You're right. Mm, I guess onii-chan should know about it."

She lifted up her head again after seeming to break free of some unseen restriction.

Once again, I had come to the Nogizaka residence.

After spending twenty minutes passing through a door that was as imposing as the Arc de Triomphe, walking through a courtyard that was bigger than a forest garden, and making our way through the mazelike interior of the Nogizaka mansion, I finally reached the door to Haruka's room.

"Haruka-sama, Yuuto-sama is here to see you."

Hazuki-san knocked on the door, only garnering a muffled squeal in response.

"Onee-chan, onii-chan bought cake from the Ginkadou , let's eat it together!"

Thump, thump, we heard a sound that suggested that the occupant of the room was locked in a struggle between her feelings and temptation.

The cake that I was currently holding in my right hand (only ten pieces are sold a day), seems to be something that Haruka really likes to eat, so much so that she eats it

once every three days. For someone who eats so much cakes and other desserts, it's a wonder that Haruka can maintain that figure of hers.

"...She didn't come out."

After that instance of movement, the room behind the door fell silent again.

Mika wrapped her arms around herself as her head leaned to one side, thinking about our next move.

"Hmm, I think onee-chan's being sorely tempted by the combination of onii-chan and the cake, so let's just start our tea party here! Hazuki-san, could you prepare what we need?"

"Absolutely."

Hazuki-san immediately set up a simple foldable table that she seemed to have pulled out of nowhere, and placed a table cloth on it before pulling out four sets of chairs (again, out of nowhere), after which she started to set up the tea cups.....Wait a minute! Where did she get all the equipment from? Weren't both her hands completely empty just a moment ago?

"Corporate secret."

The maid-san replied me nochalantly after I asked her about it. What kind of corporate secret it this...Could it be possible that the pockets of their maid uniform are linked to the fourth dimension?

"Corporate secret."

"No..."

"Corporate secret."

"Which is why..."

"Corporate secret."

"...I get it."

I gave up. It'll probaby be better for me to just shut up and sit on the chair (that came out of nowhere)!

The maid-san held up the tea-pot and looked at us.

"Would Nuwara Eliya be alright?"

"I'm not a picky tea-drinker like onee-chan, so I'm alright with anything."

"...Same for the cup on the right."

If Mika hadn't mentioned it, I wouldn't even know that 'Nuwara Eliya' is the name of a tea.

And just like this, our tea party outside Haruka's room (in the corridor) began.

"Ah, this smells so good!"

"It's Sachertorte. Would you like me to cut it for you?"

"Yes please."

Hazuki-san divided the cake with an experienced hand as the smell of chocolate immediately burst out into the surroundings. It's no wonder that Haruka likes to eat this, it looks really tempting.

Suddenly, I heard a something behind me.

"Hmm?"

"!"

I looked back and saw Haruka looking at us through a gap in the door. The moment our eyes met, Haruka hurriedly closed the door again...Was she looking at the cake?

(This is good, we've successfully piqued her interest.)

Mika whispered to me...Is it really like this?

(Do you think I should take out the candied fruits as well?)

(Good idea, onee-chan likes to eat candied fruits too.)

(Then...)

Hazuki-san left the corridor.

(Sorry to keep you waiting.)

In the blink of an eye, she was back with a tray of candied fruits that gave off a special scent.

(These candied fruits are first boiled together with sugar before it is mixed together with rum.)

Hazuki-san explained how the candied fruits were made to us. I see, that special scent comes from the rum.

Click!

The door opened again. Haruka stuck her head out again as she couldn't resist the temptation of the candied fruits, but the moment she saw me looking, she quickly closed the door again.

But her actions were really cute.

(Hmm, only a little more to go!)

(Then I shall go bring out the gingerbread.)

(Thank you.)

But in the end, despite sticking her head out several times, Haruka still refused to come out.

"Onee-chan, I've had enough of this!"

Probably because she had run out of things to tempt Haruka with, Mika was a little impatient...

"Fine! Since it has come to this..."

Mika breathed in deeply.

"If you still refuse to come out, the I'll take both the cake and onii-chan! Alright, onii-chan!"

"Huh, ah, hey!"

I shouted because Mika suddenly launched herself into my arms. Ah, she's so soft.

"Onii-chan~Roll~Roll~"

"Hey...Hey!"

Don't...Don't rub my face like that!

"Why don't you dump onee-chan and go out with me! Let's go on a date, just the two of us, let's go to Akihabara ."

"Wa...Wait a minute!"

Just as I was desperately tring to peel Mika off of me, there was a loud bang from the other side of the door.

"No...You can't!"

And immediately after that, Haruka pushed the door open with tremendous force as she came out of the room with her arms flailing.

"On...Only Yuuto-san's off limits! I can let go of everything else, but I won't let go of Yuuto-san! I...I'm the only one who can go to Akihabara with Yuuto-san!"

"..."

"..."

"...Ahahaha."

Hazuki-san and I were stunned speechless, while Mika laughed happily.

Finally realizing the meaning behind what she had blurted out, Haruka's face suddenly blushed the shade of a litmus paper's reaction to acid.

"I...What did I say...I...I'm sorry!"

The door slammed shut with a bang, afterwhich we heard the clicking of the normal lock and the anti-theft lock (a high-tech lock commonly used in high-class hotels).

"Hmm, that didn't go as well as I thought it would..."

"On the contrary, I thought it worked quite well..."

"Right, hmm, onii-chan's such a pervert~"

"...You're like a gigolo!"

The two of them (especially the maid-san standing behind us) started to go off-topic.

And it's back to square one. No, not square one, we might even be at square minus three, minus four.

"...Right now, the only thing we can do is to break in. Haruka-sama hasn't eaten for the past three days, I'm worried that she's going to collapse."

The maid-san stepped forward.

"You're right, but how do we break into Haruka's room?"

The anti-theft locks are almost unbreakable.

"By using this."

A giant blue chainsaw that the serial killers in horror movies use suddenly appeared in the maid-san's hands. Just where did she pull that out from...

"This thing is a little dangerous, so please step back."

The chainsaw started to shake dangerously as it was started up, Hazuki-san's really planning to use this!

"Well then..."

"Hand on, maybe I should try talking to Haruka."

I stopped Hazuki-san just as she was going to slice the door into half with her chainsaw (her solution's definitely not going to help).

Actually, this problem should be solved the moment I tell Haruka that I've helped her cover up. Because from what Mika told me, I'm thinking the main reason for Haruka's behaviour is because she thinks that her secret has been exposed.

Which is why the situation would probably change for the better as long as I clear up the misunderstanding, right?

"Please let me try."

At this this solution's more orthodox than using the chainsaw!

"I understand, we'll leave this to you them."

"Good luck, onii-chan!"

Mika and Hazuki-san wished me luck before I knocked softly on Haruka's door.

"Haruka, please open the door, I want to talk to you about what happened that day."

Haruka's room was completely silent.

"Actually, it's not so bad. Look, here's the cake that you love to eat!"

Haruka's room remained silent.

"If you don't open up, Hazuki-san says she's going to take your door down with a chainsaw."

"...You didn't need to mention that."

The maid-san who was standing behind me retorted. What, you did intend to do it didn't you?

"So would you please open the door?"

Just when I was going to repeat my question, I felt some movement on the other side of the door. After a little while...

"...I understand, please come in."

Haruka replied me softly.

Haruka hugged her knees on her luxurious four poster bed.

There was a teddy bear and some magazines beside her.

After confirming that I was the only one coming in, Haruka blushed as she closed her bloodshot eyes.

"...I'm really sorry for saying something like that just now..."

"Ah, don't worry about it."

About what Haruka just said, I instinctively thought that it would be better not to as Haruka what she really meant. Even though I really wanted to know, but...

"You've been absent from school for three days...I'm very worried about you."

"...I'm sorry."

"No, I'm not blaming you or anything..."

Seeing Haruka lowering her head like a puppy who has just been scolded by its master, I felt rather unhappy as well, since it looks like I'm bullying Haruka.

"Anyway, everything's alright now."

"Eh?"

"Your secret hasn't been exposed to everyone, my cover-up after you ran off probably worked I guess."

"Rea...Really?"

Haruka lifted up her head.

"That's right, so you don't have to worry about anything."

"Than...Thank you. But, how did you cover up my secret under those circumstances..."

That situation was really quite difficult...

After I told Haruka what I had done after she ran off (third-grade acting and cheesy lines included), Haruka's facial expression changed drastically.

"So you're saying that everyone thinks that you're the owner of that magazine?"

"Probably."

"How...How can it be..."

Haruka had a very strange expression on her face.

"Hmm? What's wrong?"

"But...Yuuto-san, other people will be giving you strange looks..."

Ah, I see what Haruka's worried about now. She's right, I have been harassed recently due to that incident (like the hate mail, and Sasaoka). But compared to the recent events in the world, this is nothing. Rather than seeing how upset and depressed Haruka is, I would rather endure any kind of harrassment...This is strange, I've never felt this way towards anyone before.

"Please don't worry about that, I'll be happy as long as you're alright."

I really feel that way, but...

"But...This..."

Haruka didn't seem to feel the same way.

"Yuuto-san, you don't understand, you don't understand what this is really about. You don't know how the people around you will treat you once they find out that you have an interest that's different from everyone else..."

Large tears started to roll around in Haruka's eyes.

"No...Definitely not...I do not want you to have the same experience that I did."

"Haruka?"

"...That...That kind of thing....I've already..."

Haruka buried her head in her knees as her shoulders trembled. After a while, she looked up at me after seeming to come to an important decision.

"...Yuuto, I have something to tell you. You...Would you be willing to listen to me?"

"Of course....."

The moment Haruka started to talk, I had a feeling that the only thing that she could possibly be telling me at this time, was the very thing that Mika had just told me!

Haruka started to talk softly. Just as I expected.

"...This happened when I was still in middle school."

This is basically what I understood from what both Haruka and Mika told me.

In short, a similar incident happened when Haruka was in middle school.

I'm not very sure about the exact details, but it's something along the lines of Haruka stepping on a milk bottle on a certain afternoon in class and falling down, afterwhich the manga that she had on her (the first volume of <<The Shy Triangle>>) was dropped in front of all her classmates...Just thinking about how the situation must have been like made me a little afraid.

And just like that, Haruka's secret was exposed.

When Haruka was in middle school, she was also extremely popular, which means that her special hobby soon became the talk of the school. From then on, the atmosphere around Haruka changed.

Although she wasn't bullied or insulted, the attitude of Haruka's classmates and the way they looked at her completely changed. Even the classmates whom Haruka

had thought of as her good friends started to keep their distance from her. At that time, Haruka was like a politician who had just lost an election.

According to Mika, Haruka's behaviour at that time was extremely unsettling.

"Onee-chan was extremely depressed at that time, so much so that it was painful to even look at her. The talkative and cheerful onee-chan that I had once known slowly built up a wall between her and the outside world , and rarely smiled...She also cried frequently by herself at night."

To change the situation, Mika and Hazuki-san tried many solutions, but because a school is a closed-society, as outsiders, the two of them were unable to do anything.

In the end, the situation persisted all the way until Haruka graduated from middle school. Which means that Haruka ended her middle school life on an extremely bad note.

"Onee-chan had originally planned to continue studying in the high school section of the Seijyukan Girls School, but...Because of that incident, she had no choice but to transfer to Hakujō Academy. Since there's quite a

bit of distance between the Seijyukan Girls School and Hakujo Academy, so no one would know about onee-chan's hobby."

The Seijyukan Girls School has a full nineteen-year educational system, that goes all the way from kindergarden to university, with the aim of grooming true ladies (rumour has it that almost 80% of the students in the school uses honorifics in their daily speech; It is also rumoured that you can throw a pebble into a crowd of Seijyukan Girls School students and definitely hit the daughter of a company president...The school's canteen also provides french crusine), an extremely famous school in our district. Now that I think of it, it is a little strange for someone like Haruka to study at a school like Hakujo Academy, but after hearing about that incident, I completely understand this arrangement.

"Onee-chan's extremely afraid of the possibility of her secret being exposed, and I should think that it is because of the psychological scars from that bad experience that onee-chan's acting like this now. Onii-chan, I'm placing my trust in you because you're the only person I know of who doesn't shun her in any way after knowing of her secret."

After finishing her exposition, Haruka wiped off the tears that were rolling down her cheeks.

"...That's how bad it can get. If everyone thinks that you're the owner of the megazine, they'll all look at you differently, and will keep their distance from you."

It must be painful to recall such a bad experience, but Haruka stubbornly forced the words out of her mouth.

"I...don't want Yuuto-san to be like me..."

"It won't be like that."

I understand what Haruka meant, but I didn't think that everyone will react like that. Maybe otakus are strange people in the eyes of the Seijyukan Girls School ladies, but...in normal schools, one in ten students probably don't mind otakus don't they?

Haruka shook her head in response to my reasoning.

"You may be right, but you don't have to do this for my sake, because it's my fault in the first place...I should be the one getting ostracized..."

"Please don't say that."

"But...But..."

Haruka looked at me with wide eyes.

"The friends that leave me because of this can't be counted as real friends, because even without this incident, I probably won't be able to get along well with them. I can't say that it'll be good if these people stop being friends with me, but...even if you're upset about it, you can't change things, can you?"

At least this is what I thought.

If a certain person changes the way he interacts with me based purely on the fact that I'm an otaku, it's not like I can do anything about it, even if that person is my friend.

"But...But..."

Haruka held her hands together tightly.

"But...It's very painful to be ostracized. I couldn't take it, and even now, I don't think I can. To be completely alone...I hate this feeling, and I believe that everyone would hate this feeling as well..."

She looked away painfully.

Hmm...Haruka's being rather pessimistic here. Perhaps it's normal for her to think in this way, but I still wish that she can be liberated from the shadow cast over her by that experience.

Which is why I replied,

"I don't think I'll be completely alone!"

"Eh?"

Haruka looked up at me.

"Haruka, if I had a weird hobby, would you leave my side?"

"Of course not, I like Yuuto-san, so I will not leave you because of something like that."

I was thinking about whether the 'like' that I heard contained any special meaning in it.

"That is to say, even if everyone leaves me, I will still have you!"

"But..."

Seeing that Haruka still didn't get it, I decided to continue, since these are the things that I really wanted to say to her.

"Anyway...It's the same for me. Even if the entire world leaves you, I will stand beside you, no matter what the opposition is, no matter what kind of harrassment I have to endure, I will support you. This is my promise to you."

"Eh...Eh..."

I can say this without any hesitation.

Even if the same thing happens again, or if Haruka makes a mistake that causes her hobby to be exposed to the school (...which is very possible), I will stand on her side. Even if everyone will look at me differently, even if vicious rumours are spread about me, I don't think I will ever regret my choice.

Why?

Because I am the only one who knows about Haruka's secret, because I have a resposibility to protect her secret,

because Mika had requested me to protect Haruka. Anyway, I had a lot of reasons.

But, the main reason that pushed me to make this decision was very simple.

In short--

I like Haruka. I like the Haruka who looks perfect on the surface, but is actually a crybaby, an airhead, an innocent, albeit a little quirky daughter of a rich family whom I just can't bear to leave alone.

"This is why you won't be alone, Haruka. No matter what happens, I will never leave you."

...What am I saying! Am I not saying things that sound like a love confession? What I'm saying now sounds like how a guy would say 'I want to see the reflection of the fireworks in your eyes' to a girl when they're watching fireworks.

"Yuu...Yuuto-san..."

Haruka was looked extremely moved as her big eyes teared up again.

"I...I've always been hoping for someone who would say something like that for me. I've always wanted someone to tell me that I'm not alone, that no matter what happens, I won't be alone."

Unable to hold it in any longer, tears started to roll down Haruka's cheeks. I wanted to take out my handkerchief to wipe her tears away before realizing that the handkerchief I had on me wasn't high-class enough. Sigh, I'm so useless.

"Umm...Could I ask you for something?"

"Sure."

"Would you lend me your chest to cry on?"

"Please do."

"Alright."

Haruka nodded as she buried her head into my chest, sobbing softly. I don't understand the meaning of those tears, but nevertheless, I wrapped my arms around Haruka tightly.

After a while, Haruka finally stopped sobbing and lifted up her head as she shyly said to me, her eyes red and swollen from crying.

"...Please stay by my side forever."

I answered her with another hug. I haven't noticed until now, but the soft, sweet smell of Haruka's hair seems to have a calming effect on people. I really want to stroke her lush, long hair...

"...I'm very sorry for spoiling the atmosphere."

"Ah!"

"Kya..."

Suddenly, we realized that the maid-san was standing right behind us.

Upon hearing the maid-san's words, Haruka and I pushed away from each other like two like magnetic poles.

"...Do I look that scary?"

The maid-san asked with a surprised expression on her face. But the problem is, when did she enter the room ? The door might not have been locked, but it's impossible that we didn't hear the sound of the door opening or the footsteps of the maid-san!

"The two of you were probably oblivious to the outside world during your intimate moment right?"

Mika, who had also entered the room without us noticing, teased us from behind Hazuki-san. There's definitely a problem with these two people...

"Now that the problem has been solved, Haruka-sama, please eat something. You must be hungry after not eating for three days."

"Ah, now that you mention it..."

Haruka's stomach also seemed to have finally remembered that it was hungry, as it growled cutely.

"..."

Haruka blushed a deep shade of red.

Looking at Haruka, I suddenly felt that everything about the daughter of a rich family is good.....even the sound of their stomach growling sounds high-class!

After yet another week.

"Ah, Yuuto-san."

I met Haruka on my way to school.

"Good morning, Haruka."

"Good morning, it's a really nice morning today isn't it."

"Yes it is, but I'm still feeling a little sleepy."

"No that you mention it, you really look like a panda with the dark rings around your eyes."

Haruka's laughter was like the tinkling of wind chimes as I walked to school together with her, with a few of our schoolmates also walking to school around us.

Is it just me or have I been running into Haruka while walking to school a lot more often recently?

"Just two more days and the summer holidays will finally be here."

Haruka laughed happily.

Ever since that day, Haruka returned to her normal, energetic self (with the aura befitting a daughter of a rich family), the expression on her face devoid of any clues that would point to how upset she had been merely a week ago.

"I'm really looking forward to the summer holidays. Ah, right, do you still remember what you promised me the last time?"

"Of course I do."

"Good, I think that it'll probably be in the middle of August..."

All in all, things are going well.

Through that incident (the one where Haruka's secret was almost exposed), even though Haruka still hasn't

been able to fully let go of her bad memories, but--at least she has learnt how to face up to that bad experience. On the other hand, it also turned out to be a blessing in disguise, as the distance between Haruka and I have been shortened by a lot.

Under the current circumstances, only one problem was left unsolved.

"Good morning, Haruka-san."

Suddenly, a tall figure blocked our path.

"Haruka-san, walking together with this otaku is an insult to your status."

It was Sasaoka.

"This fellow is a pervert who'll get excited upon seeing miniature figurines! Anyway, he's neither tall nor handsome, he's not very clever, and he's not good at sports. But the worst part is still the fact that he's a pervert who gets excited upon seeing figurines. Haruka-san, I find it hard to believe that you have not heard all the rumours about this fellow."

He smiled cynically, as he glared at me.

This was the problem.

The unsolved problem that I was talking about is the fact that the rumours about me (the thing that Sasaoka is still talking about) still have not dissipated yet. Those rumours were like an unkillable mosquito as it stubbornly survived for ten days (and still continues to survive).

Even though I'm used to such things no one would feel happy at being insulted by the people around him everyday.

Sasaoka ignored the unhappy expression on my face and continued,

"And that's not the end of it! In bringing such a low-class magazine to school, you've proven that you're beyond redemption!"

This fellow was really pushing the limit.

"This fellow's completely useless. Haruka-san, I really do not understand why you persist in being friends with someone like him. Ah, could it be that he's blackmailing you? If that is really the case, just say the word and I will

take care of it for you. I am equipped with grade 2 shaolin henpo..."

"...Please do not continue saying such things."

Haruka cut Sasaoka off.

"Yuuto-san is an extremely good person. He's kind, caring, and one of the people I really respect. It's such a pity that you're insulting him like this, so I would really appreciate it if you were to stop now."

"Ha...Haruka-san?"

Sasaoka didn't know how to respond to Haruka's abnormal behaviour. The other students around us also stopped in their tracks, curious as to what was happening. Could it be that...Haruka's angry?

"If you have nothing else to say, then please excuse us...Let's go, Yuuto-san."

"Ah, right."

Just as Haruka grabbed my hand to walk away...

"Wa...Wait a minute! What do you mean by that...Just what is so good about this otaku? Please explain yourself ! Hey! Haruka-san!"

Sasaoka grabbed on tightly to Haruka's other hand. Hmm...It seems like someone who calls himself a staunch supporter of feminism like Sasaoka is that much of a feminist himself when he's angry. If I don't do something right now, things might turn nasty.

"Hey, you're really going overboard here..."

Just as I was about to smash Sasaoka's face in with a broom I spotted near our position (probably left there by the people in the town's cleaning squad)...

Sasaoka's body flew into the air right in front of me.

"...Huh?"

The laws of physics clearly dictate that such a long duration of hangtime is impossible, but Sasaoka did fly towards the sky like a dragonfly bursting out from the surface of the pond. Wow...And then after he flipped a full circle in the air, Sasaoka crashed into the tree that was about ten inches away from Haruka and I before

dropping straight down onto the ground. I could swear that I heard Sasaoka groan like a frog who's going to die any moment.

"..."

And then, the launchpad of Sasaoka's body...Haruka, who standing in some martial arts pose beside me. I glanced at her, managing to catch a glimpse of something white under the billowing folds of her skirt (...), could this be... No, now's not the time to be fantasizing like a perverted middle-aged man.

The atmosphere around us was deathly silent.

Everyone around us looked at Sasaoka, who was rolling around on the ground in agony, with utter disbelief.

Hmm...

To be honest, I couldn't believe my eyes either.

Could it really be...Haruka who threw him?

Haruka ignored everyone around her (including me), as she walked over to Sasaoka, who looked like crab with

a stroke as he foamed at the mouth (he seemed to be conscious, but just barely), and smiled as she said,

"Please don't insult Yuuto-san like that."

"Ha...Haruka-sa..."

"And...The low-class magazine that you were talking about is actually mine. So if you're unhappy about it, please talk to me."

I felt as though a fire-breathing dragon was roaring in anger behind Haruka.

Under the pressure of the power hidden behind Haruka's smile, Sasaoka didn't dare to say anything. No, or maybe he's just too badly injured to be able to talk?

"Yuuto-san, let's go, we're almost late."

I looked around to see that Haruka had reverted to her usual angelic smile.

...Right, I suddenly remembered that Haruka had a teacher's license in some ancient style of martial arts, which explains the inhuman way with which she threw Sasaoka...

"Umm...Yuuto-san?"

Haruka looked at me worriedly.

"...Ah, I'm alright!"

Oh well, I don't think I should think about this anymore, it's nothing to worry about (even though I'm really worried). In the face of Haruka's innocent smile, this is nothing. I'm willing to accept anything if it means that I never need to see Haruka cry ever again.

But on the other hand, I made a mental note to myself after looking at how Sasaoka was crawling on the ground like a zombie.

Never do anything to make Haruka angry!

After what Haruka did to him, Sasaoka became noticeably quiter, and scurried like a rat before a cat whenever he saw Haruka or me. I think I can understand his feelings perfectly.

At the same time, even the vicious rumours about me had disappeared. As for the reason--I think it's obvious enough! Because there were a few members of the art club at the scene of the incident as well...something that

made me aware of just how influential Haruka is in the school.

In short, every single problem has been solved.

I was finally able to return to the life that I had left behind for two weeks.

Which is to say that the members of Haruka's fan club still looked at me with the eyes of someone looking at the person who murdered their father, and will also send me the occasional 'Stay away from Haruka-sama! You pig!' warning. But I no longer cared about such things, because no matter what they do, it is an unshakable fact that my relationship with Haruka has become much closer. Hmm, but no matter what, it'll be better if I keep a low profile if I don't want to be dragged up to the roof of the school building to be candy-wrapped.

"Yuuto-san~!"

--That was my plan, but...

"If you're alright with it, would you like to eat lunch together?"

--To be honest, it's not easy to keep a low profile.

Haruka waved at me as she smiled happily.

It was lunchtime in school, and we were in class. Recently, Haruka has been talking to me more enthusiastically than before. I'm extremely happy that she trusts me so much, but as they say, there're always two sides to a coin.

In other words...

There'll sure be quite a number of students in the classroom as well, which means that the moment the ' Nuit Étoile' does something, she'll naturally become the centre of attention.

"Ayase, looks like you've been very friendly with Haruka-sama recently, eh?"

"You're eating lunch together with Haruka-sama? Don't get too full of yourself!"

To tell the truth, many of my classmates are also members of Haruka's fan club (and they all belong to the more reactionary faction).

"Would you like to go for a round of wrap-the-Ayase on the rooftop?"

"Burying him in the garden as fertilizer for the flowers would be good too!"

"It's more exciting to dip him upside-down into the school swimming pool!"

...I should be able to welcome my summer holidays in relative safety, right?

...No, I seriously doubt that...

Epilogue

On the first day of the summer holidays, I was in Haruka's room.

"To be honest...Yuuto-san, I want to show you something."

I am in Haruka's room because of that sentence. What does she want to show me?...Could it be that she wants

to show me how she looks like in a maid uniform... Because there are real maids in the Nogizaka residence (the most famous being Hazuki-san) -- No, I don't think so, even though Haruka had talked about how she would like to try it...

Just as my brain clicked into high gear as it started to process the wild fantasies that my teenage hormones could come up with...

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

Haruka returned as she held a teapot in one hand.

Of course, she was not wearing a maid uniform.

"...Gah!"

"Hmm? Are you trying to say something?"

"No, of course not. I didn't say anything..."

"?"

Of course I won't say anything about what I was fantasizing about.

"Maybe I was hearing things...Ah, would Ceylon tea be alright?"

"Sure."

I've gotten better at this, at least I know that Ceylon's the name of a tea now.

Haruka elegantly poured the tea into the teacups (An artifact from the reign of Edward VI, valued at 65,000 Yen per piece).

"Right, I haven't seen Hazuki-san around today?"

I suddenly realized that Hazuki-san, who normally took care of pouring tea, wasn't here today.

"Hazuki-san's on leave. She went back to the countryside to visit her family."

"Oh, I see."

Only when Haruka told me that Hazuki-san's on leave did I realize that it was another maid-san who had led me into the Nogizaka residence.

"She's going back to Hakkaido, so I asked her to bring back some kuma-curry."

"Kuma curry..."

This was yet another one of Haruka's obsessions.

"I haven't seen Mika around either..."

"She went hunting with my grandfather, so I don't think she'll be back before midnight."

"Hunting..."

Such an ancient hobby. But wouldn't it be illegal for Mika to wield a hunting rifle at this age?

"My father's on a business trip to NASA, while my mother's in Paris to take a look at a family business, which means that they're both not at home. So please relax, and make yourself at home."

Haruka emphasized the fact that we were alone to soothe my nerves of sitting in such a luxurious mansion.

I see, so I'll be alone with Haruka for the whole of today. Hmm...Of course, I'm not saying that I don't like to have Mika and Hazuki-san around, it's just that spending time with Haruka alone occasionally is nice too ...

"..."

Hmm? Only the two of us...

Something about that phrase got my hormones raging again.

Of course, strictly speaking, we weren't the only ones in the Nogizaka residence, as there were other maids in the mansion. But without the ninja-like maid chief (Hazuki-san), no one will come and scare you by silently appearing behind you. From this perspective, it's as good as me being completely alone with Haruka.

We're alone!

It feels quite good.

"Eh? Yuuto-san, why is your face so red? Are you feeling unwell?"

"No...It's nothing."

However, the more I thought about how we were alone, the more nervous I became. Because for some unknown reason, I realized that I've been following every single little action that Haruka had been making.To put my nervousness to rest, I started to force myself to recite the dates of historical events (The Treaty of Versailles was signed in 1919...), but at that very moment...

"...Yuuto-san."

Haruka leaned in towards me.

"Wh...What?"

My voice trembled as I struggled to respond. Argh, calm down, I must calm down!

"I did say that I wanted to show you something today. "

"Ah, yes, you did."

The moment Haruka mentioned the thing that she wanted to show me, the image of Haruka wearing a

maid costume immediately appeared in my mind (I'm such a pervert). But once I saw the seriouness in Haruka's expression, I started to treat this seriously as well.

"Here."

Haruka said to me as she carefully picked up the magazine that was beside her.

"This is..."

The magazine was the one that I had seen hidden in the corner of a bookshelf in this room a while ago.

"This is the first issue of the <<Innocent Smile>>."

It contained some of Haruka's memories inside it.

"Would you...be willing to read it together with me?"

"This?"

"Yes, you...don't want to?"

"Of course not, I'm alright with anything..."

I answered that way since I didn't have any reason to reject her request. But it was obviously a much more serious matter to Haruka.

"...To me, this is an extremely special magazine."

Haruka said softly,

"Whenever I'm upset, I would read it to encourage myself. I believe that no matter what happens, the person who comforted me at that time is somewhere in this world, and the strength that he gave me has carried me through all this while."

Haruka hugged the <<Innocent Smile>> tightly to her chest.

"That's why this magazine is my most precious possession, for it holds the memory that I shared with that person."

"I see..."

Upon hearing the reliance that Haruka had on that person, I suddenly felt a pang of jealousy at the person whom I don't know anything about.

After a short pause...

"Which is why I want Yuuto-san to read this as well, I...I hope...that the person who is my greatest source of strength right now, can also read the magazine that has given me the strength to carry on all these years."

"Eh..."

I'm very sure that I'm not hearing things.

"Hearing how protective Yuuto-san was of me made me really happy...When I was worried about how Yuuto-san would be ostracized by our schoolmates, a part of me felt happy at being protected like this...I'm sorry, I know that I'm a bad girl for feeling that way, but...I really....really felt happy..."

"Haruka..."

I was also very happy, as I got to know that Haruka sees me as her 'greatest source of strength'.

Because I felt as though I was going to explode with happiness, I suddenly had the insane urge to run around the room while celebrating wildly, but if I had really done that, I would really become a weirdo (to the extent

that Haruka will probably call the ambulance). So I forced down the wave of happiness that was threatening to overwhelm me before saying...

"Then let's read it together!"

"Alright!"

Haruka and I sat side by side on the edge of her bed as we started to flip through the <<Innocent Smile>>.

"I really like these lines."

"This is the climax of the story, it's really interesting..."

"This illustration is really cute isn't it!"

Haruka excitedly talked about what she thought about the content of the magazine. I've never seen such an animated Haruka, and this made me realize once again just how much Haruka liked this magazine. Because of that, even though I felt a pang of regret that I wasn't the one who shared the memory with her, I guess there's nothing I can do about it! I looked at Haruka with the complicated feelings of the new boyfriend looking at his girlfriend worrying about her ex-boyfriend.

Haruka continued to happily flip through the << Innocent Smile>>

I suddenly felt something click in my mind as I looked at her posture.

It was the same feeling I had when I saw this book hidden on the bookshelve when Haruka wasn't in the room, my heart was drawn to it for some unknown reason. It was a feeling of deja-vu.

--Have I experienced this before?

In the evening, in the park that was painted orange by the setting sun, a crying girl, and the two of us sitting side by side, reading a magazine together.

An image suddenly appeared in my mind.

This was something that had happened on my way home after Nobunaga dragged me to Akihabara for the second time.

I was rushing home when I suddenly saw a girl sitting on the corner bench in the park.

That girl was crying.

She didn't care about how other people were looking at here as she cried her heart out.

All the adults around her heard her perfectly, but not one of them did anything about it as they merely quickened their footsteps.

I was really angry at how irresponsible the adults were .

Look at how sad she is. Everything will be better if only one of you adults went over to comfort her.

But no one went to comfort her.

The girl continued to cry.

So I walked over to talk to the girl.

"Are you...alone?"

"..."

The girl sobbed as she nodded.

"Don't you want to go home? It's getting late."

"...I don't want to go home."

The girl shook her head. I don't know what happened, but I could see that the girl really didn't want to go home.

Which was why I couldn't just leave her like that.

"Can I sit beside you?"

Although the girl was a little surprised by my question , but she still nodded her head almost immediately.

I sat down beside the girl.

"..."

"..."

After a short period of silence.

The girl started to cry again.

I couldn't take it anymore after a while, and decided to do something about it.

"Hey, I don't know what happened but wouldn't it be really boring to keep crying like this? Let's do something interesting!"

"..."

The girl looked at me without saying anything, but I could see the question in her eyes: 'What do you want to do?'

"Right...Why don't we play football?"

"...We don't have a ball."

She's right.

"Then let's play hide-and-seek."

"...It won't be fun with only two people."

She was right again.

"Hmm..."

I came up with a few more suggestions, but they were all rejected either because we didn't have the required equipment or because we didn't have enough people.

"This is not good...What should we do then?"

The girl looked down at the ground as she looked as though she was about to start crying again. Is there really nothing that could make her happy...?

"Ah, I've got it!"

I suddenly remember the 'thing' that I was holding in my right hand. I took out the 'thing' that took me an entire day of shopping around Akihabara to buy and showed it to the girl.

"Why don't we read this together? This is manga."

"Manga?"

The girl seemed to be a little excited about that.

"Yes, apparently this is a really rare magazine."

"Rare magazine..."

I randomly opened the magazine up to one page, and after flipping through a few pages, the girl's eyes started to light up.

"It seems...really interesting."

The girl smiled as she said, this was the first time that I've seen her smile.

The manga inside the magazine was really interesting. Although I was not interested in this magazine that Nobunaga bought at all, but I think that my attitude might have changed a little after reading it.

It was already dark when we finally finished reading the magazine.

"Do you feel better now?"

I asked. The girl replied me with a voice that was a little louder than how she was crying.

"...Yes."

She nodded.

"I have to go back, what about you..."

"Hmm, I'll...go home too."

The two of us stood up from the bench we were sitting on.

"Thank you...for cheering me up."

The girl bowed as she thanked me, still holding the magazine in her hands.

"Ah, right, I have to return this to you..."

The girl looked at the magazine longingly as she reluctantly returned it to me. She looked really sad, as though she was letting go of her most precious possession.

"...You can have it!"

I blurted out.

"Huh?"

"You want this magazine don't you? I'm giving it to you."

The girl's eyes were like the full moon, bright and round.

"Eh? B...But...This is a very precious item."

"I guess it is, but you really like it don't you?"

"Yes, I...I really like it..."

The girl answered me forcefully.

"That's settled then, I would think that this magazine would rather have you as its owner."

"Is...Is that so..."

The girl looked at the magazine that she was holding before breaking out into a exultant smile. Which is to say, no matter what happens, this magazine will be a source of happiness to this girl, so she's a more suitable owner of this book than Nobunaga. Hmm...That's decided then.

I let the girl hold the magazine tightly in her hands.

"Umm...Umm...I'm really grateful to you."

"Don't mention it. Just remember not to cry in the future, because you look much cuter when you smile."

This was what I truly felt after looking at her smile.

"Ah...Mm...Al...Alright!"

"Goodbye then!"

I ran off immediately after saying that.

"Ah...But..."

I seemed to have heard the girl calling out to me, but I didn't turn back because it was almost going to be my curfew (to make dinner for Ruko).

From that day onwards, that magazine belonged to the girl.

On a side-note, when I told Nobunaga about what I had done...

"You gave it away? You gave the first issue of the << Innocent Smile>> to a stranger...My god! How could you do that! Do you have any idea of the suffering I had to endure just to get that magazine!"

He scolded me harshly, but I retorted that if the magazine was that important, then he should have held it himself instead of giving it to me, and I also suffered a lot when he dragged me through all the bookstores in Akihabara looking for that magazine! You bought three copies of the magazine anyway, there won't be a problem even if you lose one!

"Of course there'll be a problem! God, Yuuto, don't you understand! It's common sense to buy three copies of a rare book or magazine, one for collection, one for reading , and one for showing off! It's all your fault that I won't be able to show it off to my friends!"

How could I have known about such complicated rules.

However, this is something that one must endure if one is to remain friends with an otaku.

--I finally remembered it.

I remember it all.

The park in the evening, a crying girl, the two of us sitting side by side, reading a magazine.

Could it be that the girl from that time was Haruka?

"Haruka, was the person who gave you this << Innocent Smile>>...a slightly obnoxious boy?"

I asked Haruka tentatively, but she shook her head in response.

"He wasn't obnoxious at all, he was a great guy. Although his speech was a little rough, but he was an extremely kind person...Oh, right, he's like you."

Haruka smiled shyly as she looked at me. At that moment, her cute smile looked exactly like how that girl smiled!

"...Haha!"

This was amazing.

In other words, my relationship with Haruka didn't start three months ago, but from a very long time ago. One of the reasons, or should I say, the main reason for Haruka becoming an otaku was because of me--

"Haha! Ahahaha..."

I couldn't help but laugh.

Haruka looked at me with a surprised expression on her face, looking like a primary school kid who's looking at the Mexican Salamander for the first time.

All in all, I can be absolutely sure of one thing.

That is...My strange extraordinary relationship with Haruka will continue like this.

Author's Notes:

Hello everyone, I am Igarashi Yuusaku.

I officialy became a light novel writer after I won the fourth Dengeki Hp Novella Prize...However, this series isn't the one I won the award for.

The prologue and chapter one of this book actually came from the 30th issue of the <<Dengeki Hp>>, while chapter two was first published in the 31st issue. However, the third and fourth chapters are original works.

I hope that this light novel will make every reader happy, and that the readers will not feel any pressure while reading this novel. But because that's what I would like to see, I don't really know how successful I will be at achieving this. That is why I will be very happy if even only a very small portion of my readers feel that way.

This light novel series will have a happy ending, because I hope that even the readers who don't like heavy and sad themes will be able to read on. What do you think?

Regarding the light novel that I mentioned above, the <<Shiawase Nisei Taidōkyo Keikaku: Yōsei-san no Ohanashi>> that won me the Dengeki Hp award is a completely different novel from this one.

The reason for this is very simple.

"Because I never expected that work of mine to win an award, which is why I had already begun writing << Nogizaka Haruka no Himitsu>> when I heard that I had won an award for <<Shiawase Nisei Taidōkyo Keikaku: Yōsei-san no Ohanashi>>."

This is my reason.

Seeing that I was already halfway through the first volume, my editor allowed me to finish it up before deciding on my next project. Which is how this novel came to be published.

If possible, I would like to continue the novel that had won me the award. So if any of you readers would like to see it continued, please write letters or send emails to me, or you could help me introduce that series to your friends.

...I seem to be going off-topic, I apologise for that. I should be writing the author's notes for <<Nogizaka Haruka no Himitsu>>.

Moving on, I want to thank everyone who had helped in publishing this novel.

I finally got to be a professional writer after sending my work to 'Dengeki Short 3' and going through the competition phase of the 'Dengeki Hp' short stories competition. Firstly, I want to thank the editors who had been taking my work seriously ever since I sent in my work to 'Dengeki Short 3', Wada-san and Miki-san. I know that a person's brainpower will decrease by at least 30% if he reads a work by an amateur writer when he's

tired, which is why I am extremely thankful to the two of them! Speaking of which, they've really helped me a lot, from helping me with the overall direction of the series to the naming of story components. If not for the two of them, the <<Innocent Smile>> would be <<Super Moe King>> instead. As I express my deep gratitude to the two of them, I am once again struck by how scary my naming ability is.

Another person that has contributed a lot to this novel is Shaa-sensei, who drew the illustrations for the novel. I am really grateful to Shaa-sensei for drawing illustration from the time when this novel was still being serialised in the <<Dengeki Hp>>. Under the pencil of Shaa-sensei, every character really looked like the image I had of them in my head. I would even write my draft while thinking about the illustrations. The Neko-maid illustrations was the cutest, most mischievous and prettiest of them all. Although I'm not very clever, which explains my limited vocabulary, but I really owe a huge debt of gratitude towards Shaa-sensei. Please continue to take care of me in the future, Shaa-sensei.

I also want to thank the people who worked tirelessly behind the scenes to publish this novel.

Other than that, I would also like to thank my beloved dog, a Maltese, for taking my tiredness away whenever I was stressed over writing. It's already eight years-old, and I hope it'll live for a long time.

Last but not least, I would like to thank you, the reader who bought this novel.

If possible, I would want to express my gratitude to all of you personally, but you all will probably be irritated if I were to run around thanking everyone for buying my novel, so I shan't follow through with that thought.

It will be my greatest pleasure if this book has managed to make you smile.

I'll be seeing all of you soon!

31st July, 2004. Igarashi Yuusaku.